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THE DANCING GIRL

BY

GASTON LEROUX

AUTHOR OF
"THE MYSTERY OF THE YELLOW ROOM,"
"THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF CAROLUS HERBERT,"
"CHÉRI-BIBI, MYSTERY MAN," ETC.

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THE DANCING GIRL

CHAPTER I

FRANÇOIS TELLS A LIE

THERE are certain moments when falsehood becomes a blessed thing and steals from truth its air of distinction, its radiance, its irresistible force of conviction. No shadow then passes over the face nor is there the least flicker of emotion in the eyes of the person who lies.

Françoise did not know how to lie. She always spoke the truth. That was the reason why she lied so well when she lied for the first time, for she was sustained by the terrible thought that if she lied badly she would bring about disaster.

What sort of disaster? She could not tell. She failed to understand what was happening, except that the police were in pursuit of her husband; that he was hiding from them and from her; and that he was associated with the wounded monster whose breathing she seemed to hear beneath her.

"Have you been in this room long, madame?" asked the detective inspector.

"Why, monsieur, for at least two hours. . . . You frighten me!" she exclaimed. "Are you certain that burglars are here? You

must search the house throughout. Don't leave me, monsieur."

She draws herself up on the sofa. She breathes quickly. Her deceit becomes accentuated. And instinctively she says all that need be said to induce the man to go and hunt elsewhere. She tells him not to leave her. He is already starting off. She follows him. . . . She accompanies him. She straightway becomes a born plotter. She is expert in the arts of subterfuge. To appear too self-possessed, confronted by the sudden and utterly unexpected entrance of the police, would be extremely clumsy, and Françoise displays to a nicety the necessary degree of agitation.

Not only did she convince the detective inspector of her ignorance, but she also convinced the monster who lay under the sofa, and her husband who stood behind the curtain. Both thought that she would save them without suspecting it.

That also was essential. The task was performed to perfection. They heard Françoise in anxious tones question the detective inspector who descended to the garden in response to a call from his men.

Two heads at once revealed themselves in the boudoir. First the Nut's head and then Chéri-Bibi's appeared from under the hanging drapery of the sofa.*

* See "Chéri-Bibi, Mystery Man," by Gaston Leroux.

"Look out!" whispered Chéri-Bibi. "Perhaps he's only pretending to clear out."

"I don't think so," returned the Nut in an undertone. "My wife has satisfied him that we are not here."

"Without Madame d'Haumont's assistance our goose would have been cooked," went on Chéri-Bibi, who knew how to combine the language of politeness and good form with the most expressive slang when he had to deal with the softer sex.

The Nut did not answer. With a beating heart and ice-cold temples he listened; he listened as the voice faded away in the distance—the dear voice which had saved them, and was questioning, questioning still...

The happy miracle was, the Nut thought, not that they had escaped examination by the detective inspector, but that Françoise had not suddenly found herself face to face with the horror which the sight of both of them when they entered the boudoir could not have failed to convey.

The thought that the hideous thing might have happened seemed to stun him, and it needed the sound of Chéri-Bibi painfully crawling along the floor and panting hoarsely for breath, to bring him back again to a sense of reality and the actual moment.

"Where are you going?" he asked in a state of stupor.

"Well, I say, it's not likely that you'll invite me to dinner. And then Madame

d'Haumont may come back. I can't stay here. I must bolt off, but never mind me. You've done enough, Nut. You have wiped out your debt to me at a stroke. And look here, old man, I shall repay you, and before many days are over. . . . If you weren't so far away I'd kiss your feet. I've had a few pals, but you are a man after my own heart. And you know Chéri-Bibi's heart is a thing which no one suspects him of having."

So saying, he continued to drag himself on his elbows, and by slow degrees reached the balcony.

"No one will come here again to-night. Hark at the tecs. They're leaving the villa. They've had enough of it here. So have I. You must take me down to the lawn. . . . And the old sailor Sylvio will soon find his digs. Don't worry about me."

The Nut did not leave him. He recovered his clearness of mind when he heard once more Françoise's voice calling the servants from the garden, and ordering them to lock the doors carefully. He, too, would have to disappear from the villa again in order to return to it in a more natural manner. Both men were able to take advantage of the fact that since Françoise had ordered the servants to return to the house, the grounds were free to them again, and they could slip out and make for the beach.

From thence they reached his hut without

further incident, and the Nut gave Chéri-Bibi first aid.

"You have a woman's hands, old man, and you coddle me as if I were a baby. My heart is heavy with tears. Besides, my skin is lacerated and I know someone who is unequalled for that sort of hurt. It's Doctor Yoyo."

The Nut went back to Nice and returned to the villa by car. That very night Dr. Ross sat up with Chéri-Bibi.

When Captain d'Haumont appeared at Thalassa Villa, the servants acquainted him with the events of the evening, and told him that Madame d'Haumont, scared by the sudden appearance of the police, had gone to bed. She was asleep still.

After a few minutes in his dressing-room, during which he quietly removed the last traces of work that had been as hard as a galley-slave's, the Nut went and partly opened the door of Françoise's room. She was in such a deep sleep that the unhappy man thanked Heaven for it, and reclosed the door.

In truth in the mysterious fate which dogged his footsteps were flashes of brightness, sudden and fortunate turns of events, which helped him to escape from the abyss at a moment when he believed that he was about to descend to the depths. The thought that Françoise was sleeping peacefully in her room restored in part his composure.

He had imagined that he would have to tell more lies, invent excuses, explain his late return home, and act a part. By a supreme effort, the final effort of a day which had been full of incident, he had already prepared himself for it. It was not only his clothes which he had to set right, but his look, his smile. And now she was asleep! When he was alone in his own room, the tension of his nerves relaxed, and he sank into an arm-chair with a harsh and foolish laugh, which, however, he at once checked, for it frightened him and seemed to border on madness.

It was a wonderful thing! The Nut felt safe until the next morning. . . . Accordingly, he fell into a heavy sleep; and did not even dream of the convict settlement.

CHAPTER II

IN THE ABYSS

CHÉRI-BIBI also passed an excellent night owing to certain primitive medicines the secret of which was known to Yoyo. And he, too, dreamed dreams ; wonderful dreams. He dreamed that he had relieved the Nut for ever of the three ruffians who constituted the sole obstacle to his happiness. When he woke up, his mind was filled with this splendid thought, and he tried for a few moments to recall the manner in which he had struck the happy and terrible blow by which he had achieved so desirable a result.

His memory of the dream failed him on this special point, but he did not show any great regret, for he had no lack of confidence in his powers of invention, when he was awake, if it were a question of ridding society of a few wretched pests. He had made up his mind to consult at the earliest moment, and in the utmost secrecy, his friend the Dodger upon this important matter, and a smile of good augury flickered across his

heavy lips when two sharp knocks on the door of his hut made him draw himself up, while a terrible look of hostility came into his eyes, for he did not recognise that particular manner of knocking.

"Who's there?"

"It's I," replied a woman's voice, which sent a quiver through him. "Let me come in, Monsieur Sylvio."

Chéri-Bibi, from the pallet on which he lay, pulled the cord which drew the bolt, and a woman entered. It was Madame d'Haumont.

She brought the light of the roadstead into the room with her. And in that hovel, in that dark hole in which Chéri-Bibi's heavy form was moving, she loomed into sight like a visiting angel, like a soft light from heaven, drawn to a witch's den by some irresistible invocation. True enough, over the dying embers stood a cauldron containing a diabolical concoction of herbs which had been brought by Yoyo the night before, and was being prepared not perhaps entirely for plasters and poultices. . . . When Macbeth visited the witches' cavern at midnight, a less complicated mixture was perhaps necessary than that which simmered in the Roncouyenne *piaye's* pot. Yoyo knew the secret of every compound, and could hope for a great deal from their properties. And Chéri-Bibi might have thought that he owed the vision of this fairy standing on the

threshold of his hut to the all-powerful influence of the magician.

"Come in, kind lady," said the quivering monster in as gentle a tone as he knew how.

Françoise courageously reclosed the door. Chéri-Bibi gave a sigh. He no longer saw her. The vision of light which had stirred him on his pallet to the very depths of his being seemed to have vanished. Chéri-Bibi loved beauty. In the long ago, during happy and wonderful hours, he had been associated with it; and he was a man who in his time had never hesitated to perform mythological deeds—or, rather, deeds worthy of mythological times—for a woman's smile.

However little he could see now when she closed the door, he realised that Madame d'Haumont was not smiling. No, she was not smiling.

What was she there for? She had never spoken to him. He had sometimes taken her for a sail in his boat, but she had always acted as if she were unconscious of his presence. She passed the whole of the time while she was in his boat with her eyes fixed on the eyes of her husband. Madame d'Haumont's eyes had never shown a flicker of interest in the poor fisherman Sylvio.

The wonder was, indeed, that she knew of such a man and of his home within those wooden walls facing the sea.

"Monsieur, I am Madame Didier

d'Haumont," said Françoise, in a serious voice which did not tremble.

"I recognise you, madame," returned Chéri-Bibi, so as to say something, and nodding his head. I have a fit of giddiness, he thought to himself, and expectation makes everything turn round me.

He had not to wait for long

"I, too, recognised you, monsieur. I recognised the fisherman Sylvio when my husband held you in his arms."

From the depths of the hut emerged a hoarse grunt, which was also a groan; and then silence fell.

And once more Françoise, in her serious voice, broke in:

"I saw you, monsieur, that night when you jumped out of the study window and my husband helped to save you from the clutches of the police."

"You said nothing."

"I was in a dead faint."

"That must be it."

The silence lasted a long time. Nothing could be heard save Chéri-Bibi's heavy breathing.

"I understand," he went on at last, in a whisper and with a smile—a frightful smile that she did not see for assuredly she would have fled affrighted from the sight of one of God's creatures who could smile like that—"I understand the anxiety which brings you here." And Chéri-Bibi clutched his

chest in the darkness as though to stifle the sinister chuckle which was already swelling the muscles of his throat. . .

And so this woman had fainted with horror because she had seen her husband hold him in his arms as if he were a brother. That must be it. That must be it. Had she beheld a vision of the plague itself emerge from the darkness and hold the Nut in its arms she could not have swooned in greater terror.

It was Chéri-Bibi's fate never to make an appearance without causing children to cry and women to faint.

"I understand. . . I understand the anxiety which brings you here. People do not embrace men like me. Who am I that he should embrace me? Well, madame, I am. . . I am. . ."

He half saw that she was drawing nearer to him, and he felt the warmth of her hand which dare not touch his lips.

"Don't say anything. I did not come here to ask who you are. I did not know it when you and my husband were both hiding in my room."

"*Fatalitas!* You saw us, madame!" Chéri-Bibi exclaimed with a catch in his breath. "You knew that I was under the sofa?"

"Yes, monsieur, and I did not faint."

"Oh, you knew that I was there. . . I . . . I, the horror that I am!"

She made no answer. She was waiting for him to speak now. But Chéri-Bibi could not speak. Monosyllables, parts of words, beginnings of sentences, burst forth from time to time in an under current of semi-groans and semi-moans and at once died away.

All this betrayed his enthusiasm for a woman who had quietly interposed her frail form on a sofa between him, the bandit who was hiding, and the policeman who was searching, in order to deceive and to delay fate. Nevertheless slightly more calm though still trembling with emotion and gratitude, Chéri-Bibi at last said :

" She's no coward. Fear is a child who has no place here ! . . . I can tell you quite plainly, madame, you saved us. Does your husband know ? "

" No, or I should not be here."

" Of course. And you have come to me to ask me to betray the secret. . ."

She rose from her chair. A ray of light glimmered through the window in the roof. Françoise's head was in the light which threw down delightful radiations upon Chéri-Bibi lying on his pallet.

" I did not come to learn your secret," she said. " I know that you are both running the same danger. I have come to ask you how I can guard against it, and save my husband without his suspecting it."

She had scarcely completed the last sentence when the heavy mass of Chéri-Bibi's

form swung right round, rolled at her feet, and remained there while his hands seized the end of her robe which he passionately kissed. Françoise tried to help him to rise.

"Let me be, let me be," he implored. "Don't touch me. It is so good! I do not often go down on my knees, I can assure you. Only once in my life have I done so, and that was at the feet of one of the best of women like you. All the good I can do, all the good that I try to do—and it sometimes happens that I do good—I do in memory of her. After all, that's an old story which has nothing to do with the present, but she was an angel like you. So let me weep at your feet. It's a relief to me. I have not wept at the feet of a woman for many, many long years!"

Françoise who had likewise given way to emotion, waited until he recovered his composure. It did not take long. He suddenly became furious with himself for being moved to pity, and swallowed, as it were, the rest of his grief in silence.

"Have you greatly suffered?" she asked, not wishing to appear entirely selfish though she was thinking of but one man's sufferings.

"Yes. . . yes—quite a lot."

"Has my husband greatly suffered?" she asked in a faltering voice.

"Yes, yes—a little." And Chéri-Bibi who was now himself again and dissatisfied with the exhibition of his own weakness,

determined to remember that Françoise had not come there on his account.

"Too much," he exclaimed. "He has suffered too much, for he, madame, is as guiltless as a child. He has a clear conscience like yourself, madame, and is worthy of you. You shall know everything. That is essential to your happiness. If you do not know everything, you may imagine things. . . ."

Françoise was trembling in an agony of suspense. Chéri-Bibi noticed it. He interrupted himself:

"No, *that* is something which you could not possibly imagine, so it will be better, perhaps, to keep silent." And he waited.

"I am afraid only for him," she said in her soft voice which shook slightly, and as though to give herself courage, she repeated aloud the words which she had been constantly saying to herself for the last twenty-four hours: "I trust him. . . I trust him," and then she added with a new fervour: "Tell me all that I ought to know."

Chéri-Bibi had drawn himself up and climbed back on his pallet groaning the while. He was thinking things out; and now he had ceased to reflect, and he uttered a sentence which he had been mumbling between his teeth for the last few minutes, a sentence which he had great difficulty in keeping prisoner. He could not hold it back any longer because he must have done with it,

and between him and this woman there was no room for half-confidences.

" He and I are two convicts escaped from the penal settlement."

Françoise's face was still in the light so that Chéri-Bibi, himself hidden in darkness, could perceive the sudden transformation in her features from which life seemed to have fled.

Her eyelids flickered and drooped heavily and a stony look came into her eyes, and she stood like a marble image bathed in a caressing light.

And yet in spite of its appearance the image was alive, for the lips moved and the words escaped in a breath : " Unhappy man ! "

And thus at that terrible moment when she learned the immensity of the disaster which had befallen her, she thought only of the calamity to him to whom she had given herself heart and soul, and whom, since she had given so much, she could not doubt. Smarting under the blow which had struck her, she forgot her marriage to a convict, and remembered only the convict whom she had married and who was innocent. That in itself represented to him so great a degree of misery and despair, that she could not even begin to think of the extent of her own misfortune.

Chéri-Bibi was utterly astounded to see such greatness of soul. The words which had fallen from those adorable lips confounded

him. He claimed to know something about love, and in his past life there had been moments when love had inspired him to commit generous deeds and great crimes. And yet never perhaps had he dreamt of love so absolutely perfect as that which filled the heart of this woman. A word from her drew him from his absorbed bewilderment.

"Speak!"

Then he spoke, and this pitiable bandit remembered the long ago when in the interval between two incarcerations in Cayenne he had known how to talk to a woman in lofty and tender language. The grace and beauty which stood beside him straightway drove away words of slang. A beautiful sorrow which was before him exalted his own grief. He had not been speaking for more than five minutes when the strain upon Françoise's mind was lessened and she was weeping tears of joy. . .

He spoke with deep emotion of his friend's innocence so that Françoise with an unconscious gesture of gratitude placed her hand on his hand. He at once shrank back with a hollow groan.

"Not my hands! No one may touch my hands! An angel like you cannot touch the hands of Chéri-Bibi!"

At the mention of this name famous in criminal records the wide world over, a name with which her earliest infancy had been

terrified, as governesses formerly used to terrify children by using the name of the were-wolf, Françoise uttered an "Oh!" of affright, and she replied to Chéri-Bibi's discreet movement by drawing back in horror.

He could not see her. They could not see each other. They remained in their respective places, each covered by the semi-darkness.

"Don't be afraid, madame," growled the bandit in a voice which had again become fiercely satirical. "I will stay where I am I promise you. Take time to compose yourself so that you may the better listen to me. I will only tell you what is essential, you may be sure. I don't want you to be uneasy in your mind when you are with the Nut."

"The Nut!" she exclaimed in a breath.

"That's what we called him in the settlement, madame. A nice name, don't you think? I chose it for him. But I will tell you his real name. Your husband's name is Raoul de Saint-Dalmas. That conveys nothing to you, for you were very young when the thing happened. . ."

He interrupted himself. He heard her teeth chattering. She who a few minutes before had shown no lack of courage was now overcome with fear. She was afraid of him. The whole world for a long time past had been afraid of Chéri-Bibi. And he took compassion on this poor creature who felt the terror of his name and shivered because he raised

his voice somewhat, and for a moment expressed himself in exasperated tones.

After that he spoke to her in an undertone. Oh, his voice could be soft and sympathetic enough with the happiest effect when he liked! Thus he told her Saint-Dalmas' sad story as if he were reciting one of those plaintive ballads which street vendors of picture books used formerly to sell to little children for a couple of sous after singing to them.

It was an infinitely moving sight, and only a man who was good at heart could have devised so touching and charming a manner of telling the story of a woeful act of injustice. Her teeth stopped chattering. She listened to him. . . She listened to the story.

Chéri-Bibi confided to Françoise that he had himself escaped from the convict settlement in order to help the Nut to prove his innocence, and it was while looking for those proofs that the unfortunate incident of the night before had occurred, and they both nearly fell into the hands of the police. He left her in ignorance of the existence of the villains who were pursuing her husband. Thus he reassured her to the best of his power, declaring that " Raoul de Saint-Dalmas was regarded as dead, and he had nothing more to fear from the injustice of man."

Finally he counselled her as to the attitude she should adopt. She must above all hide

from her husband her knowledge of the truth.

"But I believe in his innocence," she protested.

"Take good care not to speak about it, I tell you. So long as in the eyes of the world he is unable to produce proof of his innocence, the idea that in your heart of hearts you have the right to doubt it will be unbearable to him. The thought that there may, perhaps, be moments when your belief in his innocence may waver, will make him hate life. He told me that he would commit suicide if you ever learnt that ten years of his life were spent in a convict settlement, and he was coward enough to marry you. . . I will not enlarge upon this," ended Chéri-Bibi.

In order, doubtless, to impress more strongly on Françoise's mind the recollection of those last sentences emphasising the necessity for silence, Chéri-Bibi resumed his harsh tones which always sounded as if he were growling out threats. Be that as it may, Françoise, who was feeling less repugnance for the man who had shown so much devotion to the unhappy victim whom she adored, began once more to tremble like a leaf.

A ray of sunlight which streamed through the window in the roof stole by degrees to the pallet and threw its beams now upon his hands: "Not my hands! . . . Not my hands!"

Those two huge paws which had committed so many crimes with which the world

was still ringing frightened her! They frightened her! And suddenly the sight of them proved too much for her. As the hands moved slightly towards her she fled.

She sprang towards the door, half opened it with a fumbling hand, spluttered a few shamed words of thanks, and feeling that she was about to faint, flung herself outside and began to run; to run like a woman possessed, pursued by the word which resounded in her ears and saluted her wild flight: "*Fatalitas!*"

CHAPTER III

SEEKING EACH OTHER

When Françoise returned to the Villa Thalassa, Didier was looking for her. He could not understand how she managed to go out so early in the morning without being seen by him. The servants were unable to give him any information. Françoise heard her husband questioning the gardener.

The sound of his voice was soft music to her after Chéri-Bibi's last growls.

She felt that her heart was beating tumultuously, and she realised that she had never loved him as she loved him then. But she trembled lest her agitation should be discovered. She would have liked a few hours in which to collect her thoughts.

She wondered in an agony of suspense whether she would not straightway betray herself, whether her face would not tell Didier that she knew all. Chéri-Bibi's last words "he would commit suicide" were scarcely calculated to allay her anxiety, although they commanded her to maintain her composure.

She stood behind a small lover's temple which raised its marble cupola amidst a tangle of fragrant greenery.

She pressed her hand to her breast, but do what she might to control the sinking of her heart, she wondered if she were not about to stifle, and she fell stupidly to the ground as Didier with a look of alarm appeared before her.

"Oh, good heavens, what's the matter?" he cried, running forward to assist her.

"Nothing, nothing, I came up too quickly. I wanted to take you by surprise. I am a little out of breath. It's nothing, I assure you, dear."

She stilled the beating of her heart now that the worst was over. She recovered her mental balance, and held her body under control. She had seen him. . . . The *convict!* And she had spoken to him in normal tones.

The requisite falsehood had at once come to her lips. She felt that she would know how to lie to him without hesitation, and with a cleverness inspired by her immeasurable love for him.

Didier kissed her and she laughed happily, a little louder and more nervously perhaps than needs be, but she had come up so quickly, she had been running!

"I didn't want to disturb you this morning, you were fast asleep."

"Yes, and when I came home last night I didn't want to wake you."

"Just fancy, I had such an adventure!" she returned quickly. "The police gave me a fright you know. I expect you heard about it."

"Yes, they acted very stupidly. You won't feel safe here after this. If you like we'll leave the place."

"I am not so foolish, dear."

She at once changed the subject to something very important; a new frock which the elder Mlle. Violette was to send home that very day: "As a surprise for you, I'm going to wear it at the fête in aid of the temporary hospital at Cimiez. You will see how nice I shall look. I had it made after my own idea. Oh, it's very simple but very smart, I can tell you."

"You're a downright coquette."

"It's for you, for you alone."

Manifestly he was reassured about her. Possibly he feared lest the incident of the night before would leave in her mind some disquieting memory. His early search for her that morning, the agitation with which he approached her, implied that such was the case. But now he could breathe freely again. The terrifying experience had happened in her presence, but she was unaffected by it.

" Where did you go for a walk this morning ? "

" Why, quite near here. I went to our rock, the one which is so convenient for giving you a kiss. I waited for you there. I said to myself : He'll be sure to guess I'm here. But you didn't come, naughty boy ! "

" I did go there," returned the Nut, speaking the truth.

Though he did not suspect it for a moment, Françoise passed the morning in eagerly watching, in her mind, the " movements of the convict." Her observations were silent ones, alternating in feelings of terror and of fervent trust. A convict ! . . a convict ! Those two syllables were echoing in her heart which was beating in mingled compassion and love.

At one moment Didier was ahead of her and seemed to have forgotten her, his mind was so intent on envisaging in his secret consciousness certain tremendous and urgent possibilities. And he walked in front of her, his hands in his pockets, with weary shoulders and drooping chin. Then came a terrible revelation.

She had so far known only the hero. . . Now she perceived the convict !

He must have been like that on that burning rocky island the other side of the ocean, where fate had flung him for ten years.

Ten years in a convict settlement! That man whose fine soul she had fathomed, whose generous heart she held close in her wifely hands as though it were the heart of a child, that man had lived ten years in a convict settlement! The vision of it was so sudden that she could not repress a dull exclamation. Didier turned round.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing. I love you, I love you. . . . Oh how I love you!"

She took his head between her hands, and drew it to her trembling lips; and her kisses sought out under the kindly shadow of his hair the lines which lay hidden in his temples and bore the most painful traces of the past. She bathed them in her tears which streamed softly down her cheeks and which she was unable to restrain.

"Françoise, what's the matter?" he stammered.

"Nothing, nothing, I love you. I love you, and I am crying. Let me cry. . . They are tears of joy, dearest."

He withdrew his head from her hands bewildered and dismayed.

A love like that, when he was in the depths, was enough to make him shout aloud with joy and fear. He gave himself up to the moment, no longer wishing to think of anything, determined to

surrender himself to his fate which would strike at him again whenever it thought fit.

But what of her. . . of Françoise?

CHAPTER IV

THE VEIL IS LIFTED

SOME hours later Didier went back, on Françoise's account, to the only being who had dared to interpose between him and fate. The Parisian and his gang would not be satisfied with things as they were.

Chéri-Bibi endeavoured to reassure him.

True, after the failure of their first attempt at blackmail, and the danger which they themselves had incurred, they would leave him for a while in peace, and Chéri-Bibi would have an opportunity of making terms with them, for he himself would negotiate with them henceforward : " I will so arrange matters that you won't be troubled with them any more. Understand, Nut, and don't speak to me again of that riff-raff. They are not worth another thought. Forget them."

These words uttered with Chéri-Bibi's characteristic self-assurance, which suffered no contradiction, succeeded in calming the Nut to some extent. He knew he could rely upon his old friend of the inferno. Chéri-Bibi spoke of making terms with them.

The Nut was well aware of the immense resources which Chéri-Bibi had at command. The man who had presented him a few years before with Yoyo's gold, was quite likely to be sufficiently wealthy to satisfy the appetite of even the greediest blackmailers.

While these consoling thoughts were flitting through his mind, a knock came at the door of the hut. The Nut showed some sign of agitation.

"Don't be alarmed. It's the worthy doctor who attends the poor fisherman, Sylvio. Come in, doctor."

The doctor came in and took off his spectacles. Captain d'Haumont had never seen him so close. He could not repress an exclamation. He recognised Yoyo.

So Yoyo had accompanied Chéri-Bibi to France! The Nut would have liked an explanation of his presence, but Chéri-Bibi plainly told him to go, stating that the doctor had not a moment to spare.

D'Haumont left them more than ever convinced that Chéri-Bibi and Yoyo were in league to save him once more with the help of gold from the forest.

Slightly dazed by so favourable a prospect, he was on his way to the Villa Thalassa, when his attention was suddenly attracted by a feminine form which strangely perplexed him. The woman's bearing seemed familiar to him.

Nevertheless instead of hastening his pace he proceeded with a certain hesitation. Whenever an incident happened now that was the least unexpected, an instinctive misgiving seized him and interrupted the normal course of his movements or of his inner consciousness.

His evil destiny which for over three years appeared to have turned aside from him was once more cruelly ill-treating him, and he was bowed down under its new blows. He allowed the woman to enter the villa, and waited until she was shown in before he questioned the servant.

He learnt nothing that was of a nature to still his curiosity. The visitor did not give her name. She simply requested the servant to say that a friend of Madame d'Haumont's had called.

At that moment Françoise was shut up in her boudoir with certain books which she had obtained from Nice. These consisted of a collection of " Celebrated Trials," in which she was able to read the Saint-Dalmas case in complete detail. She devoured with avidity the report of the trial in which everything seemed to overwhelm the accused man, but in which she caught, too, with a persistence and in accents which sent a tremor through her, the echo of his furious protestations of innocence.

When a knock came at the door Françoise quickly concealed the books. She was not

a little astonished at the manner in which her unknown visitor presented herself.

She asked the servant several questions, and told her to show the visitor into the large drawing-room on the ground floor. She locked up the " Celebrated Trials " and went down stairs.

She had no sooner entered the drawing-room than a double cry of joy burst forth, and the two women threw themselves into each other's arms.

" Madame Martens ! "

" My dear Françoise ! "

Madame Martens was a very intimate and long-standing friend of the family. She had known Françoise some dozen years before when Françoise was quite a young girl. They had not met during the war but had often written to each other. Madame Martens was greatly disappointed at not being able to be present at Françoise's wedding. She herself had been married for some twenty years to a lawyer whose works on criminal law were celebrated. He was an austere man of cold temperament who had not been able to make her happy. Moreover the great grief of her life was that she was childless. When she knew Françoise best, she treated her as if she were her own daughter.

At the period with which we are dealing Madame Martens was " going on " for her thirty-eighth birthday. She had retained

a graceful figure and was above the medium height. In her day she must have been very handsome. Possibly she was still considered handsome notwithstanding the private sorrows which were wearing her down. A thick veil concealed her features.

Françoise at once wanted her to make herself at home and take off her veil.

"You will find me greatly changed. I am an old woman who has never known what happiness means. But you, my Françoise, are you happy?"

"I am devoted to my husband. You will see how handsome and good he is."

"I'm dying to know him. You must introduce me."

Just then the door was opened and Didier came in. He had heard the double cry of pleasure, and he could no longer resist his desire to know who this fashionably dressed woman was who had taken his wife by surprise, and whose manner of walking seemed not unfamiliar to him.

"Come and let me introduce you to my best friend, Madame Juliette Martens."

When Didier heard the name he stood as though rooted to the ground, while a muffled exclamation came from under the veil facing him.

"Juliette Martens! . . .Juliette Martens!" The room seemed to be turning round him, and Madame Martens leant a trembling hand on a piece of furniture.

As luck would have it the confusion which seized them both passed unobserved by Françoise. At the same moment the maid came in to tell her mistress that Mlle. Violette would be glad to see her at once.

Madame Martens and Didier had already recovered their self-possession, of which they stood in great need.

"I'll go and see what she wants," said Françoise quickly, "and come back at once. Have you finished standing upon ceremony? Madame Martens is my best friend, Didier, my best friend." And she slipped away.

When the door was closed Madame Martens sank into a chair and murmured:

"You! . . . Oh you! . . . Is it you!"

Didier was now deadly pale.

"Has the convict settlement altered me so little?" he said sinking his voice so low that she guessed rather than heard his words. "You recognised me at the first glance!"

"And you, do you recognise me?" she asked lifting her veil. "Do you recognise the marks of my sorrow and remorse?"

He saw before him the face which had been so beautiful, and inspired his eager youth. The features had lost their freshness. . . She had been his first love. That woman in the delirium of the springtime of life had committed for him the one sin, the one unpardonable sin, the burden of which she still bore.

He stole behind her.

"Juliette, have you forgiven me?" he asked in a trembling voice. "Why did you so cruelly and suddenly forsake me? I was a boy! If you had allowed me to continue to love you many of my misfortunes might perhaps, have been avoided. I should never have fallen a victim to that she-devil Nina Noha who caused my downfall; and my mother would be alive. . . Did you believe me guilty when I was sentenced?"

"No. . . . Never!"

At these words uttered with unwonted emphasis Didier went down on one knee and kissed the hem of her robe. But she at once helped him up fearing lest someone should come into the room.

"So you are married to Mlle. de la Boulays?"

"Hush! One day I will tell you everything."

"I have no wish to be your judge," she sighed. "My own sin was too great. . . Raoul, what has become of our child? Oh, it is that which has been the lasting remorse of my life."

She could not restrain her tears and she pulled down her veil again.

"Don't cry. . . Don't cry."

They seemed to hear a sound in the passage, but the door remained closed. They both heaved a sigh in which was expressed their whole past.

The past! Twenty years before during the protracted absence of M. Martens who was travelling about the world as a member of a Commission on international law, she had given way to the impetuous love-making of Raoul whom she met at a seaside resort.

She came to herself at once, horrified by the sin which she had committed, and chastened by the terrible event that was to follow.

A child! The intense longing of her life became from day to day a torment, a purgatory. A child whom she would have to hide and perhaps never see!

She was obliged to resort to the most odious lies and leave for Switzerland. One night a door was opened and a child was placed in Raoul's arms, for these things alas! happen in real life just as they happen in fiction. Actions which appear to have been prepared, "arranged," yet lead to inevitable results; coincidences which are looked upon as exceptional nevertheless do not cease to be repeated in accordance with an inexorable logic which brings together in the same place, at the psychological moment, persons who have every possible reason for hoping never to meet again.

"How small the world is," people say.

However small the world may be it is larger than man's imagination, and in order to satisfy oneself of the fact it is only necessary to read the news columns of the *Police Gazette*.

The conviction of an innocent man was bound to render the child's future a precarious one. The woman into whose charge she had been entrusted refused to look after the daughter of a convict, and she got rid of her to a woman, a stranger to Switzerland, who was on a short visit to that country and who never came back again.

"How greatly to blame we have been, Raoul. That, perhaps, explains why God has so cruelly punished you. But what has He in store for me?"

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Françoise found herself in the presence of Mlle. Violette and Gisèle.

"You wanted to see me urgently. Is anything serious the matter?"

"Something extremely serious," returned Mlle. Violette with a smile. "I shall not be able to send home your new frock until to-morrow evening."

"Why, is that all?"

"We were passing this way. Gisèle decided to come with me so that you shouldn't grumble too much at me. She wants to thank you for all your kindnesses to her and to her mother."

"How is your mother, Gisèle?"

"A little better, madame. Thanks to you she is receiving the best of medicines—the sun."

"So you have moved into your flat on the Quay du Midi?"

"Oh, we only had to walk into it. Everything was ready for us. How can we express our gratitude to you? And the flowers. . . All those flowers—and the sun!"

"Flowers!" broke in Françoise in surprise. "But I haven't sent you any flowers!"

"I was told that the flowers came from you."

"That's one of the unexpected things my husband would do."

"Oh, madame, he is so good. Thank him on our behalf."

"Wait here a moment."

Françoise went back to Madame Martens and Didier in the drawing-room.

"Tell me, dear, do you send flowers to girls without letting me know? Oh, don't pretend to be surprised. Your young favourite, Gisèle, has told me all about it."

"Really. Is she here?"

"May she thank you herself?"

"Why, ask her to come in."

Before Françoise returned to the drawing-room Madame Martens told Didier of the numerous vain and fruitless attempts which she had made to trace the whereabouts of the child.

"I looked for her for three years," he said.

"Have you given up the search?" asked Madame Martens.

"Yes, I've given up the search."

"Did you learn that she was dead?"

"No; she is not dead."

" Be careful what you are saying. You know what has become of our child ! "

It was just then that Françoise came back. When she left the room again to fetch Gisèle, Didier said to Madame Martens :

" You asked me what had become of our child. Well, you will see. . ."

Gisèle entered accompanied by Françoise and Mlle. Violette.

The young girl who so shyly came towards them seemed very frail and beautiful. She had never, perhaps, looked so " ethereal," so radiant with her gold-toned locks escaping from underneath her little fur toque, her almost colourless complexion, her transparent skin, and her wide eyes at once soft and bright.

She was silent. She felt almost overcome. She was looking at Captain d'Haumont as pictured angels in a book of hours look up to God.

Didier went towards her and held out his hand which she kissed.

" Please don't do that, my child," said Didier in a tone of surprise, kissing her paternally on the forehead. Then Françoise kissed her.

" This is our young protégée, my dear. Don't you think that she's pretty ? You must give her a kiss too," said Françoise turning to Madame Martens who was standing quite close to Gisèle and with difficulty restrained her agitation.

She had but to lean forward to place her lips on Gisèle's forehead.

"Why, you are crying, madame," said Gisèle in surprise.

She raised her beautiful eyes with a look of frankness to the unknown woman whose enigmatic face was hidden under her thick veil, and who had suddenly displayed such unexpected interest in her.

Meanwhile Mlle. Violette hastened their departure. Françoise, who was still absorbed in her own tragic thoughts and too preoccupied by her own anxieties to be surprised at anything that might happen around her, went with Gisèle and Mlle. Violette as far as the garden gate.

Madame Martens made for the window. Standing behind a curtain, she was unable to remove her eyes from the beautiful child of whom she had been dreaming, as it were, for countless years.

"My daughter! . . . Our child! . . Our child!"

Didier, beside her, pressed his fevered brow to the window pane.

"The poor thing has greatly suffered," he said, "but if there is anything that I can do to make her happy. . ."

"I, too. What can I do? But after all I have seen her. I can see her often unknown to her. . . My child!"

Gisèle was disappearing from view round one of the bends of the avenue, and Madame

Martens sent a passionate kiss in the direction of the girl.

"Gisèle! Gisèle! Oh, I must see her every day."

"Are you staying in Nice?" asked Didier.

"Yes, for the time being. My husband has just been appointed Solicitor-General for this district. His promotion has been dreadfully slow. He never knew how to make friends. He is very unhappy. We are very unhappy. Oh, when I think what happiness is here in this home, when I think of the roundabout way by which that happiness reached here, I am terrified. What a tragic and fatal and beautiful thing is life! How often have I thought of you, to pity you, to bewail the terrible fate which struck you down. And now I find you here. But I am afraid for you. I am afraid."

"And I, I am afraid for Françoise," sighed Didier.

"Yes, I can understand. . . Love her!"

"I reproach myself every day for marrying her. It was shameful of me to do so. I deserve every punishment for it. But may she come to no harm!"

"May she come to no harm," repeated Madame Martens in a voice that seemed like a mournful echo.

Suddenly Madame Martens who had remained standing at the window hoping perhaps that Gisèle would come in sight again cried "My husband!" Those two words

which went forth in a dull cry of anguish, spoke volumes for the relations which subsisted between husband and wife.

M. Martens, in fact, could be seen in the garden with Françoise who was returning to the house.

" He is coming to fetch me. I'll take him off. I don't want you to meet him," exclaimed Madame Martens and hurried away.

Didier had time to catch sight of a man with the traditional magistrate's appearance. He wore side whiskers and clean-shaven upper lip like the old-fashioned magistrate who continues to sit on the bench in every sort of trial. He was not a man, but a conscience who was for ever cross-examining other people's consciences with pitiless severity. He was one of those lawyers who have been made ill by the Bérenger law,* and never discover extenuating circumstances either in persons or crimes. Men like M. Martens are still to be encountered in the provinces. Moreover they are kept there, and they wreak their revenge for it on their fellow men.

M. and Mme. Martens took their departure, leaving behind them an immense sense of gloom.

Françoise returned to Didier in the drawing-room.

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* This law empowers the judge to discharge a prisoner when there are extenuating circumstances, and particularly when he is dealing with a first offender. (Translator's note.)

"Madame Martens was eager to get home. She didn't even give herself time to introduce her husband to you. As far as that goes M. Martens did not press her to do so. He is a bear! They are not happy, you know. There is no love lost between them."

And she gave Didier a hug.

CHAPTER V

CHÉRI-BIBI STRIKES A BLOW

NEXT day the Parisian, the Joker and the Burglar held a consultation at M. de Saynthine's place.

After their skirmish in the old town and their escape by a miracle from the police search, they decided to lie low for a while.

Moreover the Burglar could no longer show himself, and thus the shop kept by Monsieur Toulouse was deprived of its owner for the time being. Finally, they were in hopes that the Nut, realising his danger, would make them some new proposal before long.

The Dodger who still continued to carry out his duties as chauffeur was more or less present at these conferences, and did his best to lose as little as possible of the conversation.

About four o'clock in the afternoon, the bell rang at the garden gate at the back of M. de Saynthine's small villa near the Californian quarter.

The two mastiffs who were invariably let loose as day began to wane set up a hideous

snarling. The Parisian himself went to open the little spy-hole in the iron gate.

A man stood before him whom he did not recognise. His black hair fell in disorder over the sharp outlines of a brownish face. A soft hat with turned down brim threw a shadow over the man's wild and uncouth features. He was dressed in a loose grey suit of clothes with wide pockets.

"What do you want?" asked the Parisian.

"I want to speak to M. de Saynthine," replied the stranger in a guttural voice and peculiar accent.

"Who are you?"

"I am under-gardener to Captain d'Haumont."

The Parisian remained silent for a moment. He was taking time to think. Obviously the Nut was sending him some message. But he had not expected it to reach him so soon. He had every reason to be on his guard.

"One moment," he said, and he closed the spy-hole.

As soon as the Joker and the Burglar were informed they gave way to a shout of rejoicing.

"He's coming up to the scratch," exclaimed the first.

"His money is ours," squeaked the second.

"Don't be so impatient, and make less racket if you don't mind," said M. de Saynthine cautiously. "In my opinion he is

showing a great hurry after 'growling' about it so much."

"He saw that he would lose his life, his love and his honour if he didn't give in. Put yourself in his place and think of the risk he runs. You would have signed a treaty of peace by this time," argued the Burglar.

"Climb up to the roof," the Parisian ordered, turning to the Joker, "and keep an eye on the immediate neighbourhood. You, Burglar, stay in the next room ready to jump on the fellow if you notice anything suspicious. We'll soon see what he wants. He might be an Italian brigand—a Calabrian. But be careful not to use your shooters if you can avoid it. I'm not fond of making a row."

Having thus distributed his troops, the Parisian sallied forth to meet the enemy, but not before telling the Dodger to hold the car in readiness to start away at a moment's notice.

The Joker, who was watching on the roof, made a reassuring signal, and the Parisian opened the garden gate. The man came in. He was self-possessed and showed no sign of fear. The Parisian requested him to walk ahead of him. As he entered the dining-room overlooking the sea which was illuminated by the glare of the setting sun, the visitor took off his hat. The Parisian could not repress a cry:

"Yoyo!"

"Oh, so you recognise me, as I recognise you."

The Parisian had by this time recovered his composure. He had seen Yoyo at work in the great forest; he knew the extent of his devotion to Chéri-Bibi, and he thought that he was filled with a similar devotion to the Nut. Those red-skins were often capable of heroic and disinterested sacrifices. They give themselves up to one or the other without thought of reward, for the pleasure of the thing, and they are content if they are patted like a dog.

Thus the Nut, so the Parisian argued, had brought Yoyo to France in order to secure his personal safety, and Yoyo knew everything. His present visit was a sufficient proof of the fact. His "I recognise you" was perfectly frank. The Parisian made up his mind to bring matters to the point.

"Well, say what you have to say. Did Captain d'Haumont send you here?"

"No," returned Yoyo, shaking his head and looking the Parisian straight in the eyes. "No; I have had enough of that man."

These last words were spoken in a tone of hatred which astonished the Parisian. He grew more and more suspicious. He threw himself into a rocking-chair, lit a cigarette, and swinging himself backwards and forwards said with an air of detachment:

"Why do you come here to tell me this?"

"Because he struck me yesterday and

treated me like a dog. I am a Christian. I have been baptised."

"It's a good job for you," the Parisian returned with a sneer.

"It'd a bad look out for him," snarled Yoyo. "He went for me because I failed to keep guard over M. Toulouse's shop the other evening when he was nearly caught by the police."

"So were we," said the Parisian with another sneer.

He did not wish to appear to be astonished by the red-skin's presence, whatever happened, nor in particular to be impressed by his visit. What was Yoyo driving at? That was the essence of the whole matter.

"Did you come to France with him?"

"No, Chéri-Bibi sent me here with gold for him; my gold."

The Parisian stopped rocking his chair.

"Everything that I possess belongs to Chéri-Bibi," went on Yoyo, "but everything that I possess does not belong to that man. Chéri-Bibi saved my life. He saved my wife's life and my brothers' lives. That man struck me just as another man might strike his dog. . . Let him die."

"Meanwhile you gave him the gold."

"Yes," sighed the other "I had to give it to him. I promised Chéri-Bibi that I would."

"Was there very much of it?"

"As much as there was before when you

tried to get it at Señor Fernandez's place . . . You remember."

"Hang it all, you make some splendid presents when you are about it," the Parisian said jeeringly.

As though he were annoyed or ruffled by his questioner's satirical language, Yoyo stood up, knitting his brows, and a fierce look came into his eyes.

"That's enough chatter. Do you want the gold—yes or no?" he asked between his clenched teeth.

The Parisian realised that the time for jesting was over. Yoyo's irritation, not less than his eagerness to be revenged on the Nut, seemed to be genuine.

"If you know where the gold is why don't you take it yourself? That is what surprises me, Yoyo. Up to now you have been our enemy, and I am compelled to take my precautions."

"You may take all the precautions you think fit, and have the gold wherever you please. You are asking me absurd questions. You know quite well that it is out of the question for me to take away from that man the gold which I promised Chéri-Bibi to hand over to him. You are under no promise to Chéri-Bibi. . . Do you follow me?"

The Parisian understood and was dazzled by the prospect. That, too, formed a part of the Indian's peculiar mentality. It was

morally impossible for him, as he declared, to lay hands on the gold. The Parisian had no wish to waste time in argument. On the contrary, he would at once take advantage of the red-skin's disposition because to-morrow he might, perhaps, change his mind.

"Where is the gold?"

"I will take you to it. It's not very far from here."

"You'd better look out for yourself, Yoyo. If you deceive me you are a dead man. On the other hand if you are an honest friend you can ask me anything you like, and I'll see that you have your revenge on the Nut."

"That's all I want," declared Yoyo. "The rest doesn't matter. You are wrong to entertain suspicions of Yoyo. Yoyo won't leave you."

"I shall take my friends with me, I warn you of that."

"Bring them along, there won't be too many. The sack is heavy."

Ten minutes later the car containing the Parisian, the Burglar, the Joker and Yoyo, with the Dodger at the wheel, started off in the direction of Cape Ferrat.

When they passed Villefranche the car made a somewhat mysterious bend towards the overhanging mass of rocks, and then came back again by a sunk road leading to the sea.

At last, still following Yoyo's directions, they entered a creek screened from observa-

tion by the surrounding rocks. It seemed quite natural that the Nut should have chosen this wild, solitary, and almost unapproachable spot wherein to hide his treasure.

Yoyo explained to the Parisian that the sack of gold was in a cave which the torrent, when it overflowed its banks, swept and entirely covered. They must exercise great caution. Moreover he would lead the way.

"No, you must show us the way," said the Parisian. "The Joker will go first, you next, and the Burglar and I will bring up the rear."

Yoyo gave him to understand by a gesture that it was a matter of indifference to him. The Parisian and his comrades were fully armed, so what had they to fear?

They leapt on to the rock. The cave lay in front of them. The waters were rushing into it with an ominous sound.

Nevertheless the last rays of the sun threw a reassuring gleam into it. Along the rock, under its granite roof, naturally formed flagstones of sufficient width skirted the whirlpool.

Yoyo pointed to a recess in the cave at the height of a man. "That's the place," he said.

The three ruffians on the flagstones stepped on tiptoe the better to see it. Their backs were turned to the whirlpool. Yoyo stood in the midst of them. The Dodger remained at the entrance to the cave.

Suddenly something fantastic happened. The slab on which they stood abruptly rose higher, and the last beams of the setting sun revealed an immense pillar consisting of the fierce visage, the colossal shoulders of Chéri-Bibi who bore the weight of the rock on which four men were slipping with shouts and curses of terrified despair, and flung it into the swirling waters whence it disappeared from sight.

A few cries could still be heard from the vortex. Then nothing but a great silence, the silence of death. Yoyo, who knew what was about to happen, had already come up to the Dodger who rescued him from the whirlpool. Nothing more was seen of the others.

And suddenly from the cave into which darkness and death had penetrated, demoniac laughter, the echo of Chéri-Bibi's infernal joy could be heard. It was the manifestation with which he usually rewarded his efforts whenever he laid claim to have done a good action.

Chéri-Bibi was laughing ! . . . . laughing !

Poor Chéri-Bibi ! He would certainly have felt less cheerful if he could have read a letter written by de Saynthine which was delivered that very evening to Count de Gorbio at Nina Noha's place.

" You will doubtless read in to-morrow's newspapers that M. de Saynthine and two of his friends have been accidentally drowned

. . . As far as I am concerned I am merely injured, and I have taken refuge on board the schooner 'Tullia.' Let people think me dead. We were all the victims of a plot hatched by Didier d'Haumont. I can now tell you who this man is. He is a convict escaped from the penal settlement. His real name is Raoul de Saint Dalmas. In Guiana we nicknamed him the Nut."

CHAPTER VI

NINA AND THE NUT

RAOUL DE SAINT-DALMAS ! The murder of Reynaud the banker ! The theft of the pearl necklace ! The startling effect of the letter on Count de Gorbio and Nina Noha may be conceived.

" Why, of course it's he. How was it that I didn't recognise him straight away ? " exclaimed the dancer.

Nina was far from understanding how it was that she failed to identify those features which whenever she beheld them, attracted and held her attention, like some bewildering problem the secret nature of which she racked her memory to fathom.

Raoul ! It was Raoul, the officer who had done such heroic deeds in the great war, the Didier d'Haumont who had so strangely come between them and their nefarious schemes in so far as they related to the de la Boulays' family.

He, too, when he met her had looked at her with a certain uneasiness and with an obstinacy which was dangerous to him if he

wished to remain unrecognised. What could his plans be that he dared come near her at a time when everything called upon him to live in retirement and to keep silence ?

" How changed he is ! " she murmured. " He is much more than twenty years older."

" Well, a convict settlement does not rejuvenate a man," grinned de Gorbio.

Though Nina was amazed by the event, de Gorbio had a feeling of triumph. He was filled with a savage elation.

Many things stood between Raoul de Saint-Dalmas and him. To begin with it was de Gorbio who had murdered Reynaud the banker. It was he who had stolen the pearl necklace in order to give it to Nina Noha.

The Queen of Carynthia's necklace ! Nina was wearing it. She had not dared to wear it, however, until several years later. True, the pearl with the flaw in it by which it might have been identified at sight was removed and the setting changed. Besides, who gave a thought to that old story now ?

Well, there was one man who was bound to be always thinking of it. And that man whom she believed to be at the convict settlement had sat down beside her at a charitable fête !

The pearl necklace ! De Gorbio and Nina were both staring at it now, and suddenly, though not a single word was spoken between them, they made the same gesture ; and they slipped it off her splendid neck.

Nina opened a cabinet, took out a casket, and placed the necklace in it. Then she locked the cabinet door. And once more de Gorbio gave a chuckle of triumph which sent a shiver through the dancer.

"Why do you laugh? Are you so pleased that this man is here?"

"Yes, I am pleased. Look at me. Why, look at me, Nina. Don't you see that I am choking with joy. Didier d'Haumont an escaped convict!"

"Yes, I understand that. With a secret like that you've got him. He belongs to you!"

"You don't follow me at all," burst out de Gorbio. "He does not belong to me. He belongs to the convict settlement. Do you understand now that I am going to send Didier d'Haumont, Mlle. de la Boulays' husband, back to the convict settlement?"

"You are terrible."

"I am your pupil."

"Don't you think he has suffered enough?"

"Not a bit of it."

"You'll make me believe that you are in love with Françoise."

"I don't care a hang about Françoise. But he has humilated and crushed me and had me turned out of the house. Have you forgotten that he nearly killed me?"

"My Stani, I believe you were in love with Françoise!"

"You know quite well that I have never

loved anyone but you," he returned with a dramatic gesture. "I have sufficiently proved that to you."

They remained silent. During the pause many memories flashed through their minds of the time when Count Stanilas de Gorbio was employed in a junior capacity in the jewellery establishment belonging to the expert to whom the sale of the Queen of Carynthia's necklace had been entrusted.

Young and well-dressed in the style of a man about town, as befits a tradesman whose business prosperity depends upon the women of the under-world who possess too much jewellery, and the minor actress who does not possess enough, he had at first amused Nina by his gift of the gab and next by his audacious love-making, for he told her that he loved her to distraction. She had merely laughed at him up to the day when having said to him: "I don't even know, my dear fellow, what you are capable of doing for me," he had coolly produced the necklace which she so greatly coveted; the pearl necklace stolen from Reynaud the banker.

"This is what I am capable of doing for you," he said. And she accepted the gift from the man whose hands were stained with blood. After a period of stupefaction mingled with admiration she became de Gorbio's mistress.

They were wonderfully well suited to each

other. Already at that period Nina formed part of a considerable organisation of espionage, subsidised from abroad, and she had discovered in de Gorbio the very man of whom she stood in need.

Raoul had been sentenced to death and reprieved. The dancer allowed him to leave for the penal settlement without regret and without pity.

Nina's heart did not appear to have softened with the years. And that evening after they received the Parisian's letter she ended by saying to de Gorbio :

" Upon my word, perhaps you're right. Send him back to the penal settlement. That's where he'll interfere with us the least."

De Gorbio was dreaming of his revenge and did not answer her.

" What are you going to do ? " she asked him next morning as he was preparing to leave the villa.

" I'm going to think things over," he replied vaguely.

He left her in a very inattentive and absent-minded manner thinking only, from all appearances, of the revenge that he was about to take.

" Poor Raoul ! " sighed Nina. " He'll only get what he deserves. He should have stopped in Cayenne."

Nevertheless the notion that de Gorbio's malevolent joy had its origin in a real love for Françoise still clung to her.

Doubtless it was this idea which led her to open the cabinet to take another look at the casket, and press the spring of a secret drawer, unknown to de Gorbio, in which many years ago she concealed the clouded pearl by which the necklace would certainly have been recognised. The drawer contained, also, sundry letters from the Count expressed with the usual recklessness of love letters; and these were sufficient to designate the real murderer of the banker Reynaud.

As she gazed at those relics Nina wore a smile which plainly indicated the scheme which she would eventually adopt if de Gorbio ceased for an instant to be faithful to her. Then she quickly put away her little treasures, for there was a knock at the door, and the maid announced a visitor.

"At this time of day!" exclaimed Nina. It was ten o'clock and she had scarcely got out of bed.

The visitor was particularly insistent on seeing her, stating that the matter was important. Nina read the card which had been handed to her and could not repress an exclamation:

"Well, I never!"

The visitor was Didier d'Haumont.

Didier d'Haumont was calling on her! He dared to call on her! So he considered himself safe from recognition.

"Either he is mad or he loves me still," she thought.

It was this last supposition which she adopted. It always pleases a woman to explain the inexplicable in an extravagant passion by attributing it to her own charm and beauty. She at once assumed that Raoul de Saint-Dalmas had escaped from the convict settlement only to return to her, and that he preferred to run the risk of being sent back again to Cayenne to the torment of being deprived any longer of her society. The insipidity of a honeymoon with M. de la Boulays' daughter could never have made Raoul forget the times of their own love. It had sufficed for her to meet the poor fellow once for him to become again her slave whatever the cost might be.

Thus these thoughts of his love stirred the dancer and greatly satisfied her sense of pride. And she at once flew to arms. In other words she quickly and surely made up her lips and eyes in the manner of the born coquette, and wrapped herself as little as possible in a loose, beflowered kimono, which gave full play to her bare and perfumed arms.

After a last look in the glass she went to her boudoir and said to the maid :

" Show him in."

She waited for him surprised to feel that her heart was beating quickly. Had she been in love with this man who had come to see her, she could not have been more agitated.

Ever since Madame Martens had recog-

nised him without difficulty the Nut had been a prey to the gloomiest forebodings ; he was assailed by the recollection of his enemies and the past. He was conscious that whatever he might do, the truth would be sure to come out one day. To begin with, he was prepared for the reappearance of the sinister figures of the Parisian and his gang. One thing only could save him and restore his honour and permit him to hold up his head before Françoise—the proof of his innocence in the affair of the necklace.

So long as he retained his freedom of movement—whether for a few weeks more, or a few days, or a few hours—his work must be to discover proof of his innocence.

Among all his misfortunes Fate appeared to have reserved an extraordinary piece of good luck for him. He could no longer doubt—at least, he hoped that he could no longer doubt—that he had seen the necklace again, seen it round the neck of Nina . . . Nina Noha !

And ever since he had seen it, he could think only of it. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, they were the same pearls, for he knew them ; he and Reynaud had admired them years ago, before the sale, and on the fatal evening he had held them in his hand. What did it matter that one of the pearls was missing, the one which, as Reynaud had pointed out, contained a flaw ? The absence of that particular pearl was but an

additional proof. Thus they had destroyed the peculiarity of the necklace which might be a danger to them.

From whom had Nina received it? Had she possessed it long? The thing was to be certain.

In spite of himself, his footsteps led him to the avenue in which Nina had rented a villa for the season. How did he know that? Because nothing that she did was unimportant to him since his eyes had fallen on the necklace round her neck.

He was now near the villa. He saw a few trees, and a small garden behind marble balusters.

He drew still nearer. He stood outside the door. If he could only find out! "Yes, but suppose she recognises me? Well, if she recognises me, how am I to know that she won't assist me to prove my innocence?" he thought.

He rang the bell.

The door was at once opened by a maid, attired like a dresser in a theatre, who eyed him with brazen curiosity, but whom he did not even look at.

He hardly knew what he said. He insisted on seeing the dancer, stating that his business was urgent and important. And he gave the girl his card.

He was shown to a room on the first floor and left to himself.

The maid returned.

"Madame will see you," she said, and when the door was closed upon him she remained behind to listen.

The Nut stepped forward ill at ease, recognising the old perfume before even he caught sight of Nina reclining on the sofa.

She made a gesture for him to draw nearer. He went up to her mechanically. Had she at once shown him the door and told him to leave her, he would have fled.

She pointed to an arm-chair, and he sat down.

The horrible past seemed to come to life again, and rendered him as helpless as a child. He was afraid now, afraid of this woman who had caused him such infinite suffering.

How had he managed to come so far? By what stroke of madness was he there? Ah, yes . . . the pearl necklace!

He stared at the woman's neck. The necklace was no longer there.

It was she who was the first to break the silence.

"You wished to speak to me, Captain d'Haumont?"

What unexpected softness in that voice! In former days she spoke to him in an off-hand manner when she dismissed him, and even when she allowed him to remain with her.

He looked at her. She was smiling, graciously affable. Obviously she had not

recognised him. She seemed quite friendly towards him. He at once began to think of the phrases that he had prepared a few hours earlier in case he decided to visit her.

"Madame, I've called on you about a charitable fête."

"Another! Cannot you do without me?"

These last words were uttered with so obvious a purpose and might mean so many things, that the Nut was for the moment taken aback. Was he to regard that audacious phrase merely as the superlative affectation of the courtesan, or was he to discover in it some more terrible significance?

Had she or had she not recognised him? A moment ago he would have sworn that she had not recognised him. Now he no longer knew.

In any case, Nina did not seem hostile to him—far from it. He had reason to notice that she was making special efforts to please him. She sat up and leant towards him in an attitude of the greatest unconstraint. She was smiling at him.

"What more can I do to be charitable?" she asked.

"Why, merely show yourself, madame, as you did at Valrose, and dance for our pleasure and the pleasure of our soldiers. Give us the same programme. Wear the same dress and the same jewels."

His voice shook as he spoke those last words. Nina, on the other hand, was too much on her guard not to attach enormous importance to them. She raised her eyes to the face which a moment ago seemed so mysterious and which now could not succeed in dissimulating its anxiety.

"The same jewels? Are you keen also on my jewels?" she asked with seeming indifference.

"By no means," returned Didier. "But you have such beautiful jewels that they add lustre to your presence if that be possible. I was at Valrose the other day with a friend who is an expert in fine pearls, and a great admirer of them. In fact, he makes a hobby of them. He told me that he had rarely seen such perfect specimens as those contained in your necklace."

She lay back again on the sofa and her face was hidden in the shadow. Fortunately or unfortunately for Didier, he could not see the fierce expression which came over it.

At that moment Nina hated her whilom friend enough to kill him on the spot if she could have done so without danger or scandal.

And so he had returned from the penal settlement not, as she had all too soon imagined, impelled by the ardent memory of their past love, but to ask her questions about the necklace!

Obviously he had recognised it, or at least he entertained strong suspicions in regard to it. And, at all events, he had behaved with a clumsiness for which she swore that he should pay heavily.

"As to my necklace," she said with icy composure, "I must tell you that being in need of money I have sold it."

"Might I ask to whom?" returned Didier. "I am sure that my friend would have given a good price for it."

"Your friend or you?" asked the terrible woman in a clear and somewhat hectoring voice.

As the Nut, distraught by the directness of the attack, knew not what to say, she went on, rising to her feet:

"Confess, dear Captain d'Haumont, that you would have liked to make a beautiful present to your young wife."

He rose from his chair. He realised that she had no wish to prolong the interview. Moreover, he scarcely knew what he was about. And it was more than he could bear to hear this play-actress speak of his wife. Nina perceived his confusion, and, of course, was encouraged to continue.

"Madame d'Haumont is very handsome, you know. I congratulate you."

He hurriedly took leave of her, feeling that he was on the point of committing some irreparable folly. Nevertheless, he had the strength to say that he would see her again

to discuss the final details of the charitable fête.

He found himself outside the house without knowing how, after stumbling against Dr. Ross, who was coming in, and jostling the maid who opened the door for both of them.

He walked away, repeating to himself: "She recognised me! She recognised me!" But in reality he was not quite certain, for, after all, if she had recognised him, there was no reason why she should not have utterly confounded him. She would have at once flung his real name in his face. She was a woman who was afraid of nothing.

Moreover, what had she to fear, particularly from him? Ten minutes later he had a feeling of certainty, absolute certainty, that she had failed to recognise him.

Dr. Ross found Nina Noha in a nervous and feverish state which afforded him the opportunity of giving her one of the prescriptions which were his peculiar and secret property. These prescriptions were never made up by chemists, for whom, and for the entire pharmacopœia, he expressed profound contempt.

For that matter, he invariably carried the necessary drugs with him as well as certain powders which the sick person could not withstand, and was either cured or died within a very short time. Death among his patients, however, had been extremely rare

since he began practising on the Riviera, and Nina Noha reposed more than confidence in him.

"Oh, doctor, I don't know what's the matter with me to-day. My nerves are on edge. Listen, I have just received a visit from a charming man, Captain d'Haumont. Well, I was most disagreeable to him without any cause. I say without any cause, because he came to ask for my co-operation in some charitable fête."

"Who is Captain d'Haumont?" asked Dr. Ross with his usual imperturbability.

Nina had to tell him all that she knew of the captain's marriage with Mlle. de la Boulays and his duel with Count de Gorbio.

"Who is Mlle. de la Boulays? Who is Count de Gorbio?"

Under the pretext that he was ignorant of affairs in Europe and people in France, this queer doctor never lost an opportunity of asking questions, and he asked them with a persistence and sometimes with an ingenuousness which surprised or amused or annoyed his fair patients.

"He is gathering information," thought Nina, who was the first to overlook this lack of discretion.

Apart from this, he was the best of good fellows under his cold exterior, ever ready to do a good turn. Was he not the man who had unearthed for Nina that handsome young maid, as artful as a monkey, who was called

Zoé, and whose spontaneous and indefatigable zeal delighted the dancer ?

Mlle. Zoé, doubtless, was anxious on her side to thank Dr. Ross for procuring her such an excellent place, because when she was seeing him out she kept him on the doorstep by a chatter to which he listened with perfect patience and kindly interest. Zoé already loved her mistress. She inquired after her health. She said aloud :

" Madame tires herself too much. She works every morning and rehearses every afternoon. For instance, although she is indisposed to-day nothing will induce her to miss the rehearsal at four o'clock at the Eldo."

Dr. Ross shook his head, adjusted his spectacles, and went away with the stiff and starched bearing which apparently he took for the mark of European distinction.

* * * * * *

He was quite an eccentric person, was Dr. Ross. To begin with, he attended only such patients as pleased him and when he was " in the mood," declared Nina, who readily discussed with her friends the whims of the " red-skin," as she called him. She little knew how near the truth she was. She quoted cases in which he had declined to put himself out, though he was offered big fees. On the other hand, he was known for his compassionate treatment of the poor,

and it was no secret that he frequently went the rounds among the humblest cottages on the coast.

The fishermen at Villefranche, in particular, prided themselves on his visits, and a certain Sylvio whose leg was in a bad way as the result of an accident, was not alone in his gratitude to him for his kindness.

That very morning the benevolent hand of the doctor from Chicago had pushed open the door of the poor fisherman's hut which lay crouching between two high rocks. There was considerable gloom in the dingy and low-pitched room within those damp walls. For one thing, the Dodger was sighing and mourning over his own death which tied him to that dark and joyless neighbourhood, far from the smiles of Zoé. He had read in the newspapers that M. de Saynthine's chauffeur was drowned with his master during an excursion that ended in a terrible disaster.

"Monsieur Hilaire, will you never leave off joking?" grunted Chéri-Bibi. "I've known the time when the mere fact that you were with me was enough to make you happy."

"I agree, Monsieur le Marquis—I beg your pardon, my dear Monsieur Sylvio."

"You're not in want of anything here," went on Chéri-Bibi, "and you run no risk of meeting a quarrelsome wife."

"There's no doubt about that."

"Well, I shall be glad, my dear Dodger, if you will allow me to recover in peace from the stupid accident which chains me to this bed like Prometheus to his rock." We know from the earlier history of Monsieur le Marquis du T. . . . alias Chéri-Bibi, that during one interesting period of his career, he had some acquaintance with polite literature.

And Chéri-Bibi began to complain on his own account.

As a matter of fact, never had the Titan, oppressed by the bonds which the hands of the gods had ingeniously forged for him, uttered more frightful groans than did the Nut's formidable protector, reduced to keep his bed on account of a sprain which had become inflamed since he determined, against the advice of his doctor, to set to work again, in a task of justice and the devil from which M. Hilaire was still shuddering.

The door opened, therefore, and the worthy Dr. Ross came in, and with his particular unguents and poultices and plasters, applied himself at once to his salutary work.

Chéri-Bibi, finding relief, condescended to express to him between two groans some amount of gratitude, after which he asked him if there was any fresh news with regard to Nina Noha. Since Chéri-Bibi returned to Europe, Nina Noha was continually in his

thoughts. Everything that he knew of her, and everything that the Nut, during his years in the convict settlement, told him about her, had constrained him to conclude that she was not entirely innocent of Raoul de Saint-Dalmas's misfortune in the courts, and knew all that there was to be known about the murder of Reynaud the banker.

Chéri-Bibi had himself on several occasions noticed the necklace which Nina was wearing, and when his inquiries led him to discover the connection which existed between the Nut's old love and de Gorbio, a matter of which the Nut was still unaware, he did not hesitate to set Dr. Ross on to her, and to place in her service young Zoé whose business it was to report to him everything that was said and done in the house.

Zoé was chosen by him because she spoke Italian, and the Count and Nina often, when they were alone, chatted in that language.

What Zoé had seen and heard and understood that morning was of importance. Accordingly, Dr. Ross achieved some success when he repeated to Chéri-Bibi what the temporary maid had told him.

Chéri-Bibi, then, was right. It was the actual necklace stolen from the banker, and judging from the conversation that was overheard, his murderer was no other than de Gorbio.

The proof of these facts was locked up in a cabinet in Nina's villa. Chéri-Bibi uttered a growl of triumph and leapt from his bed. Unfortunately, he fell back again with a yell of fury and pain.

It was Gisèle smiling in the beneficent sunlight as she gracefully pushed the arm-chair in which was seated the woman who was a mother to her, and in whom a new hope of life was springing up.

At that view Didier no longer felt, for the time, the agony of suspense which kept him night and day on the rack ; and Madame Martens forgot all her feelings of remorse in the presence of the adorable fruit of a sin which she had deeply lamented. Neither the one nor the other was conscious of anything around them but those golden locks encircling the smiles of youth.

How were they to know that they were not the only persons to behold and appreciate that sight ? Besides, why should they concern themselves with the unknown person who was partly concealed in the shadow of the awning of an open-air restaurant ? He was merely another lover of oysters who was, of course, entitled to forget his oysters for a while in order to savour the charm of a pretty girl leaning over a balcony.

Didier and Madame Martens had by now entered the house. Gisèle did not see them. A small boy was passing with the local newspaper shouting : " Terrible accident at Cape Ferrat."

Gisèle, betraying a certain anxiety, threw down a coin and lowered a small basket at the end of a piece of string as is the custom in those parts.

The newsboy put the newspaper in the basket. She was now reading it.

" Mother," she cried suddenly, " it's M. de Saynthine. That awful man who was following me about has been killed with two of his friends and servants. It was an accident in the roadstead at Villefranche. Poor fellows ! "

But Madame Antheny was not inclined to mourn over the death of her child's persecutor, and she declared with a pathetic conviction that " Heaven had punished him."

The artless cruelty of the last sentence could not have passed unobserved by the man eating oysters, for the shadowy form seemed to derive some enjoyment from it.

Gisèle had the newspaper in her hand when Didier and Madame Martens came into the room. The first thing the girl did was to hand the paper to him.

At first he said nothing. The shock was too much for him ; his secret joy overpowered him. Providence which had for so long crushed him with misfortunes was now ranged so startlingly on his side, that he felt stunned. For there was no room for doubt, and he recognised from the description of the persons who were in the car with de Saynthine that he was for ever rid of his implacable enemies.

An item in the news columns, a commonplace accident, had rescued him from the abyss into which he had once more been plunged. In the darkness of his horizon

the new dawn appeared to him to rise more splendid than ever. He was dazzled by it.

He would have liked to read once more those lines proclaiming his freedom. He was unable to do so for the light of a great joy was dancing in his eyes. And it was his daughter who had brought the news to him. Fate was surely on his side now!

When he could utter a word he stammered a few hurried excuses and slipped away. He slipped away to prevent himself from clasping the child to his heart and shouting aloud his gladness and relief.

When he reached the quay he repeated to himself, he could not help repeating to himself, in a low voice as though it were a litany: "The Parisian is dead!"

He went past almost at a run the man eating oysters. The man who had finished his lunch, paid his bill, lit a cigar and walked quickly away towards the harbour muttering: "The Parisian is dead, but not yet buried!"

CHAPTER VIII

A DAY THAT COMMENCED WELL BUT ENDED BADLY

On the afternoon of the same day Count Stanilas de Gorbio—called by Nina in private "my little Stani"—proceeded to the Promenade des Anglais, where he expected to meet several persons of rank, making a short stay at Nice, who were likely to supply him, without knowing it, with certain information which he would dispose of to his own advantage.

The day was beautiful, and a large number of persons were sauntering on the promenade. They walked about and gossiped among the mothers of families comfortably installed in their chairs, diligently stooping over their needle or crochet work, and interrupting themselves only when the vision of some sensational dress or some unknown face passed them, exciting their feminine curiosity, always on the alert, and impelling them at once to exclaim: "Who's that?"

The world is small, and the same people meet each other whether it be in summer in

northern watering-places, or in winter in southern watering-places, or in spring and autumn in society circles in Paris, or in the Avenues of the Bois at eleven and six o'clock.

The Count de Gorbio had made a number of friends in fashionable circles, if, indeed, one may give the name of friend to every person with whom one shakes hands. His "presence" had never been so greatly in request as since the duel in which Captain Didier d'Haumont had laid him low. Heaven alone knew how many stories were whispered about that incident. The Count's engagement to Mlle. de la Boulays was no secret to anyone, for he had himself taken care of that, believing, too hastily, that the "matter was settled." The rebuff from which he suffered made all the greater stir.

Thus he had more than ever reason to "pose" in order to put people on the wrong scent, and build up anew his society connections. He lost no opportunity of showing himself and of proving that even so painful an event as a marriage broken off and a duel ending in defeat, could not stay the onward march of his career. As he was believed to be very rich and to possess considerable influence, people soon overlooked his reverse. They were convinced that a man of his stamp would soon be in a position to retaliate.

Now his revenge was at hand. There was no mistake about that.

The beaming smile which lit up his face did not pass unobserved. He was congratulated on looking so well. His conversation was lively and he displayed a ready wit.

"There's a man who had a good dressing down," whispered a lady of mature years to her marriageable daughter, who had already had one or two love affairs with foreign adventurers.

Suddenly a cloud came over de Gorbio's countenance, and his eyes stared before him. People turned their gaze in the same direction, and they saw Madame d'Haumont walking along the promenade with Madame Martens.

Françoise seemed quite happy, as, indeed, she was. Since the terrible moment when she learnt the truth, and began to watch the Nut with a feeling of tragic anguish, she had never seen him, as he was that day, apparently free from care, and with a naturally easy bearing almost incomprehensible to a person like Françoise, who had sounded the depths of the abyss on the brink of which her husband was sailing.

He had returned to the Villa at Cape Ferrat literally transformed mentally and physically. The wrinkles on his forehead which, as Françoise saw, were ploughing deeper day by day since their arrival in Nice, had vanished as if by magic.

She could not help showing her astonishment, and Didier, suspecting that he did

not look the same man since he had learnt of the providential accident which relieved him of the Parisian and his gang, thought it well to give her some vague explanation : " I've had a lot of business worries. They're over and done with. Don't let's talk about it."

She reproached him chaffingly for allowing his mind to be absorbed by anything outside their love, which was the one thing which mattered as far as she was concerned.

She, too, rejoiced inwardly, convinced that Didier had already made a step forward in the path which he was taking, as Chéri-Bibi had explained to her, to discover proof of his innocence of the murder which had wrecked his life.

That beautiful day appeared in her eyes all the more radiant, and Madame Martens was surprised at her cheerfulness, which contrasted with the somewhat austere and reserved expression which she had noticed on Françoise's face in their previous meetings.

Françoise, as yet, had failed to catch sight of Count de Gorbio. She did not see him until she was quite close to him and on a level with the group in which he was indulging in much voluble talk.

Then a change came over her face. She looked straight in front of her as if she had not seen him ; but they both knew that they had seen each other. And the onlookers in the scene were equally aware

of it. They noticed that in a flash their eyes had crossed. It was a veritable godsend to the gossips, was that meeting. What was about to happen? For certainly something would happen. As a matter of fact, the Count took off his hat to Françoise.

She could not fail to see him raise his hat. At first she grew pale when she recognised the Count, and then was conscious that her face was becoming scarlet. She hastened her steps, slightly turning her head away with a look of obvious contempt. She was fuming. She bit her lip.

"Did you see that? What impudence!" she said to Madame Martens.

"It is, indeed!" returned Madame Martens. "And what an outsider! He ought to have pretended not to see you."

De Gorbio remained standing in his place, and continued to stare at Françoise till she was out of sight. A peculiar smile twisted his lips, and a great silence fell around him.

"Madame d'Haumont has cut me," he said, in a loud voice. "She makes a mistake. She does not possess a better friend."

* * * * * *

When Françoise reached the Villa Thalassa, the first thing she did was to tell her husband the story of her meeting with the Count, and of his raising his hat to her.

"I hope you didn't take any notice of him," returned Didier.

" I passed him as if I did not know him."

They were astounded by such ill-bred effrontery, which threw a shadow over the perfect happiness of that day.

They sat down to dinner with their thoughts still on de Gorbio. They knew that he had gradually recovered health and strength, but they were far from expecting him to appear so soon on their horizon. They had the right to assume that Didier's late rival would have the good taste to make himself scarce if by chance the three of them were to meet. What was the meaning of that gross breach of etiquette ?

Didier had serious reasons to mistrust de Gorbio, and on several occasions in M. de la Boulays' house he was surprised by his conduct. Without being able to put into words anything definite, he entertained a feeling of hostility to him apart altogether from the rivalry between them for Françoise ; but he was sufficiently honest to doubt his own judgment, and to attribute his suspicions to that very rivalry and his own jealousy.

But now he yielded to his antipathy to the man who might have married Françoise, and who more than ever seemed to him an adventurer on a big scale.

The incident suddenly assumed in his eyes a wider significance. He began to look upon it not only as evidence of an absolute lack of tact but, for all he knew, as embodying a threat.

Didier and Françoise were telling each other what was passing in their minds, and exchanging their conjectures, when a servant entered bringing a visiting card on a tray. Didier read it, and uttered a muffled exclamation.

"It's he! This is a bit too thick."

"Who is it?"

"De Gorbio!"

"You don't mean to say so."

François took the card from her husband and in her turn read: "Count de Gorbio desires to see Captain and Madame d'Haumont on a matter of importance."

"But I don't want to meet the wretch who tried to kill you," she exclaimed.

The servant was waiting for orders.

"Show him into my study," said Didier.

"Why should you see him?"

"To prevent him once for all from calling again," returned Didier, striving to regain his self-possession.

The Count was waiting in the study without impatience. He revelled in the stir which his mere presence in the house created. He pictured to himself the d'Haumont's amazement and anger confronted by a visit which was bound to appear to them as an act of audacity and insolence beyond expression. What would they decide to do? He envisaged the possibility that they might refuse to see him. In that event he would decline to leave the house, and whatever

happened, an explanation would become necessary and, indeed, inevitable.

It would be a short but crushing explanation, and his features wore an expression of fierce triumph as he thought of the effect which he was about to produce by a single sentence.

When Didier entered the room, mastering with some difficulty the wrath which might well fill the heart of the outraged husband, he was struck by de Gorbio's expression, by his face beaming with an infernal joy, and he could no longer suppress his indignation. In a few sharp words spoken in a harsh voice, he told de Gorbio that he considered his visit in utter bad taste, whatever his object or pretext might be.

To which the Count replied :

" I have something very important to say to Madame d'Haumont, and I thought it as well to say it in your presence."

The two men were then separated by the width of the room. De Gorbio drew near Didier, fixing him with a look in which gleamed the joy of revenge. Didier realised that he held some terrible weapon against him, and feared the worst.

And, indeed, the worst happened. De Gorbio went on :

" I wanted to tell her that she married a convict."

Didier flinched under the blow.

" That's pleasant news for Madame d'Hau-

mont, don't you think, Raoul de Saint-Dalmas ? "

So de Gorbio knew all ! His secret, his dread secret, stood now between him and that man. At a moment when he was rejoicing over the timely disappearance of the four villains who were besetting him with their infamous schemes, a fresh enemy sprang up before him—and such an enemy !

The man whom Françoise had rejected, made game of, whom he himself had struck down by an unexpected shot, had come to life again to wreak upon him this most terrible vengeance. It was an incalculable misery. Not because of his own harsh fate, but because of her sorrow and distress, because of the death, body and soul, of her love for him. Because a phrase like that : " You married a convict," carried death with it.

Didier remained motionless. He was like a standing corpse. Facing him were the lips, which continued unceasingly to throw out hatred and terror with the one word— " Convict ! "

Suddenly Didier could no longer bear to hear the word.

He flew and clutched de Gorbio by the throat in an iron grip and gasped :

" Enough ! . . . Hold your tongue ! "

The other, choking for breath, struggled, kicked the furniture which was overturned, and as the dreadful word was no longer

repeated, Didier dropped him, suddenly realising his homicidal gesture.

"But why don't you kill me? . . . It's your business," squeaked de Gorbio, carefully placing himself all the same behind a piece of furniture out of the reach of a fresh attack.

"You are an expert in the business," he sneered. "The first step taken, the rest is easy."

True, the first step in the path of crime would have been easy for Didier. If ever a man longed to kill another, Didier was that man at that terrible moment.

While this cruel scene was being enacted in the study, Françoise, alone in the room in which her husband had left her, waited with ears on the alert for the least sound.

She had promised Didier that she would remain in the room. He had sworn that he would keep the peace and retain his self-possession whatever happened, and return to her as soon as he had seen the Count.

But he did not return to her. The interview was still continuing. Françoise's anxiety and misgivings were increasing with every minute. What could the two men have to say to each other?

The most dreadful surmises were kindling in her mind. Nevertheless, she stopped short of the only one which contained the truth —de Gorbio's knowledge of Didier's secret.

That supposition was so unthinkable that she refused to entertain it. She preferred

to set it aside at once. She had in mind something which appeared to her less dangerous. She knew that de Gorbio had business relations with M. de la Boulays. The Count in that regard had a ready-made pretext for his strange visit. But, still, it could only have been a pretext. What was there at the bottom of it all ?

Well, at the bottom of it all was the mutual hatred of two men who loved the same woman. De Gorbio and Didier hated each other like poison. Françoise had realised that fact at the time of the duel.

What new tragedy was to be the result of this never-ending visit ?

A shudder passed through her. She partly opened the door of the room. She seemed to hear loud shouting. And then there was a heavy, dull shock such is made by furniture being overturned on to the carpet.

She ceased to think of anything. She forgot her promise to Didier. She went towards the study, breathless.

In the study de Gorbio said to Didier :

" I don't intend to leave this room until I've seen Madame d'Haumont. I want her to know everything, and to know it from me. It's I who will show her in your presence the measure of your disgrace."

Didier leant over and clutched the table with convulsive fingers, mastering in this way the impulse to fly at that abominable throat, and to silence it for ever.

"Not that," he said, in a smothered voice. "Anything you wish but that. Make me suffer if you will, I will bear it. But spare her!" And he had the marvellous cowardice to whisper: "You loved her once."

"I hate you still more than I ever loved her," snorted de Gorbio.

"Listen to me," went on Didier, in a rough voice no longer suppliant. "I am speaking for your own good. Don't drive me beyond my powers of endurance."

"I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of a convict."

"Again! . . . Hold your tongue. . . . Just now you were afraid of a murderer. De Gorbio, I have it in me to kill you, you know."

As he uttered these words, he heard the sound of a footstep in the passage. He went to the door, lifted the curtain, and caught sight of Françoise's silhouette. Then he turned round to the Count, and with a face which was deadly pale, went up to the table, opened a drawer, and drew out a revolver.

He would have to commit murder. It was inevitable; for there was no other means of stopping the awful truth which came from those accursed lips.

Meanwhile de Gorbio kept his eyes fixed on Didier's movements.

"Oh, oh, the revolver!" he sneered.

"Yes, the revolver. My wife is coming and she will be here in a moment. If you

breathe a word of that which she must not know, I swear that I'll shoot you like a dog . . . I swear I will."

De Gorbio shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you take me for a child? My death would not preserve your secret. Do you suppose that I have not taken every precaution? It would be only another murder and entirely futile, take that from me. If you are absolutely bent on killing someone, kill yourself. That's the best advice I can give you."

"I should have done that already if it could have saved her," gasped Didier.

Then a silence fell between them and they waited for Françoise to come in. The seconds passed and seemed interminable.

It was because Françoise had stopped midway in the passage, her hand pressed upon her heart. She was stifling.

What was she about to see when she opened that door? What dreadful spectacle was still reserved for her? That noise a little while before, was it the noise of a piece of furniture which fell or the noise of a body? Now that she had come to discover, she must take courage. She looked into the room and she saw. No. There was no dead man in the room, but two men staring at each other with an unutterable hatred. . . She walked into the room like a phantom.

* * * * * *

At the sight of the two men's attitude of

hostility and the look that they cast at her when she came into the study, Françoise felt certain that she herself was the sole object of the quarrel and the scene which ensued.

Every other conjecture vanished. She would soon know how far the Count's audacity in his love for her would carry him, and she would be ready to deal with his impertinence.

"You wanted to see me Monsieur de Gorbio," she said.

Before he made answer the Count turned to Didier and the sight that met his eyes was so strange that, impressed by the swift transformation in him, his mind saw in a flash the advantage to be gained by adopting a new course.

Didier's first attitude, which had been madly hostile, had given way to an expression of the most terrible anguish and of supreme entreaty. His whole being seemed to cry aloud: "Have pity on her!"

Seeing him thus distracted, so utterly at his mercy, de Gorbio began to think of what Nina Noha had said to him: "That man is in your power. You can do with him what you please." And certainly he gathered from the look in d'Haumont's eyes that he could ask anything from him; exact anything from him; treat him as a slave.

Was not that real revenge? Was not that more complete, more ruthless than a vengeance which consisted in destroying him by a word?

Suppose he spoke that word, what would be the result? Obviously it would be the end of Didier, but it would be the end of himself also. Whereas he would be able to enjoy for some time the little affair and say the word only when, at last, he had dragged his victim in the mud for his own infamous purposes and secret designs.

De Gorbio having made up his mind broke the silence which had fallen, and turning to Françoise:

"Madame, forgive me," he said with a bow and making no attempt to hide a sly and cynical smile of triumph. "Forgive me for my boldness in disturbing you in this happy home; but it was a matter in which we have interests in common."

"I know that you have business relations with my father," she returned.

"We still have business together, madame. Fortunately commercial engagements are not broken as easily as. . ."

Didier did not give him time to finish the sentence. He went up to Françoise and led her to the door while he said in an imploring voice:

"Let me settle this business, which is of no importance, with de Gorbio."

"But Monsieur de Gorbio has only to apply direct to my father," she objected with a tremor.

"Please go," murmured Didier. "You promised me not to come here."

"I will wait for you in the next room. Get rid of him."

"I should have done so by now if you had kept away."

She agreed to wait in the adjoining room until the conversation was over. Her impatience was redoubled by her inability to comprehend where the incident left her. Why was de Gorbio still there? What more could he have to say? And why did her husband take so many precautions after having given way to such furious anger?

These were so many questions to which she could find no answer, and which left her mind in a state of utter confusion.

She grasped only the one fact that if she had remained with the two men any longer, some irreparable incident would have occurred. Now she waited until De Gorbio chose to leave the house.

When the door was closed, Didier turned to him, and in shame-faced fashion, without looking at him, asked:

"What do you want of me?"

"Well, many things," grinned de Gorbio. "You understand, my dear Captain d'Haumont, that I need to think things over."

"Don't drive me to despair."

"Not a bit of it. I am not a bad sort. I proved that a moment ago. I really felt pity for you when I saw you looking so wretchedly miserable, and I forgot the many reasons that I have for bearing you a grudge.

You will see that we shall finish by becoming good friends."

"I don't believe in your pity. Tell me what you want from me so that she shall not know; so that she shall never know."

The Count looked at Didier, and already congratulated himself on deciding to savour a revenge which he would coldly and patiently prepare. It was a revenge which was only just beginning and, in very sooth, it was a joy fit for the gods. How far he was from the threatening d'Haumont of a little while before!

"I will tell you soon," he made answer. "Good-bye, Captain d'Haumont."

He went away leaving Didier crushed and dazed by the blow which he had struck him, and by the thought of the other blow with which his silence menaced him. Françoise saw de Gorbio go past wearing an insolent smile. As soon as he was outside the house she went to Didier whom she found still in the study, his face terribly distorted.

"You must tell me what passed between you. I heard the noise of a struggle. You came to blows."

"You did well to come in, my dear Françoise. Your presence restored us both to calmness. If you had not come I should have killed him. Oh, how I loathe the man!"

A quiver passed through him and she saw that he was trembling with unsatisfied hatred. She took him in her arms once more so that

he might find a sure refuge from the ills which were for ever crowding upon him, and draw from her love a new confidence, a new strength to struggle against his terrible fate. But this time Didier could only sob on her shoulder like a child.

CHAPTER IX

CHÉRI-BIBI AND THE NUT

THE next morning when through the partly-opened door of his hut, Chéri-Bibi caught sight of the Nut coming towards him, he felt a thrill of pride which may be easily imagined. Had he not succeeded in disposing of the Nut's worst enemies ?

Soon, when he could move his " weak leg," a final expedition would deliver the necklace into his hands and prove to the world the innocence of the man once known as Raoul de Saint-Dalmas.

The way had been cleared. Now they could breathe a pure atmosphere which ran no danger of being suddenly contaminated by certain odours from the convict settlement lingering still round such enemies of the human race as the infamous Parisian, the repulsive Burglar, the sallow-faced Joker and the hideous Caid, who had departed this life if not for the greater glory—for Chéri-Bibi was not in the habit of advertising his good deeds on the hoardings—at least for the secret rejoicing of the Nut's protector.

Didier was slowly approaching the humble hut in which the fisherman Sylvio lived. He walked along with head sunk on his breast, and Chéri-Bibi could not see his face until he was within a few paces of him.

He was at once struck and astonished beyond measure by the Nut's air of dejection. Chéri-Bibi who had assumed his most engaging smile—Chéri-Bibi's smile !—watched him wrapped in thought.

The most disquieting feature was that Didier did not utter a word. He shook Chéri-Bibi by the hand, and sank into a seat without even asking his friend how he was.

Chéri-Bibi became increasingly anxious, and closing the door, said in the most kindly tone :

" What's the matter ? "

" The matter is that I'm at the end of my tether," returned Didier with a deep sigh which intensified Chéri-Bibi's concern.

" At the end of your tether ? With whom ? With what ? "

" There have been moments," went on Didier, " and I do not deny, Chéri-Bibi, that this is one, when I regret leaving the convict settlement."

When he heard those words, the bandit sprang so quickly from his chair that he overturned the stand which kept his stove and the entire system of flues in place, causing a fine clatter and throwing the room into disorder. But Didier was so obsessed

by his gloomy thoughts that he did not appear to notice anything and did not even give a start.

Chéri-Bibi crossed his arms in the midst of the chaos, and asked with a look which, in spite of the absurd accident, he endeavoured to make triumphant :

" Surely the Parisian, the Joker, the Burglar and the Caid leave you alone now ? "

Didier shook his head.

" Very likely," he said in a dull voice, " but I must tell you, Chéri-Bibi, that de Gorbio knows my secret, too, and he came to my house and threatened to give it away only yesterday."

" Oh, really, he knows your secret, too, does he ? " Chéri-Bibi bellowed. " Well, make your mind easy, for it won't be more difficult to get rid of him than it was to get rid of the Parisian and his gang."

Didier, when he heard those words, grew deathly pale.

" What do you mean ? "

He stood up and looked at Chéri-Bibi straight in the eyes. Chéri-Bibi did not at first grasp the significance of Didier's movement. The question that the latter put to him betrayed an excitement which utterly deceived him. The " What do you mean ? " seemed to him to have a tremor of hope about it as it came from Didier's lips.

" What do you mean ? " seemed to signify " Do you mean to tell me that you have

really got rid of the Parisian and his gang for good, and are prepared to do the same with de Gorbio, who stands in my way ? "

It was therefore with a smile of self-satisfaction that Chéri-Bibi made answer, emphasising his words with a wink.

" I mean that de Gorbio is not safe from an accident, either."

But he had scarcely finished the sentence when Didier, who now grasped his meaning, for he knew his man, drew back from him staggering in horror.

" You did that ! You did that ! "

" Well, yes, I did it. Why, what's happened ? What's the matter with you ? Are you going to faint ? "

Didier continued to fall back with arm outstretched as though to avoid contact with the fearsome individual who, without knowing it, had made him his accomplice, his accomplice in this fresh and terrible massacre.

This man had committed murder for him while he believed that it was an accident, a providential accident, a thing which happened by chance. By chance ! Chance's name was Chéri-Bibi, and he had slaughtered the Parisian, the Joker, the Burglar and the Caid, and chance asked only to be allowed to continue in the same path !

Completely bewildered by Didier's attitude, which he failed to understand, Chéri-Bibi endeavoured to fathom the mystery and

spluttered once more : " What's the matter ? What's the matter ? "

" Don't come near me. Don't come near me. Don't touch me."

Poor Chéri-Bibi was expecting to receive the Nut's congratulations ! Suddenly he stood aghast at the thought that the Nut was not pleased. Then he broke into a passion like a child :

" Come, I say, that would be too silly. You are not feeling sorry for them ? "

And, as Didier remained silent, overcome by the thought of the murder of four men, Chéri-Bibi rapped out with a pompous gesture :

" They were criminals ! "

" And we ? What are we ? "

At these words Chéri-Bibi, who had a high opinion of himself, and believed that it was shared by Didier, concluded that the latter had suddenly gone off his head, and he expressed his secret mind by twice striking his immense forehead with his gnarled forefinger.

" But can't you see," went on Didier in a smothered voice, " that you terrify me ? Chéri-Bibi, Chéri-Bibi, are your hands always to be red with blood ? You have made me your accomplice. Your awful fate lies heavy upon me. I don't want to see your face again. You make my gorge rise."

The last sentence, in particular, was keenly felt by the man who had done so much for

Didier. To be treated in this way by his dearest friend, for whom he had shed the blood of so many other men!

Chéri-Bibi drew himself up with a look of wounded pride, and in a bitterly satirical voice said:

"I find with regret Captain d'Haumont, that no matter what I do I succeed only in offending you. Yes, yes, I know that I am the reflection of every vice. Compared with me, the worst man is as white as snow. Even the Parisian himself was a lamb, if you glance over my countless misdeeds. I . . . I shock everyone. I am capable, as the saying goes, of producing harmony in hell, and here I am producing hell in the heart of an honest man. Forgive me, Nut."

His bitterness had given way to a veritable sorrow. He was suffering beyond words. It was almost with a sob that he gasped out: "Forgive me, Nut." But Didier, by this time, had fled from that accursed den.

Then, left alone, Chéri-Bibi became a prey to despair and tore his hair in a frenzy. "*Fatalitas!*" he roared. "*Fatalitas!* I rid the earth of four villains, and I am treated as if I had murdered four honest men."

He threatened the heavens with his clenched fist, as he was wont to do in moments of great crises.

"You heard him say: 'You make my gorge rise. I don't want to see your face again.' O, curse my luck! My mug dis-

gusts him. We shall see if he will feel the same disgust when I bring him the dancer's necklace and wipe away the stain of his conviction."

And Chéri-Bibi once again, in a mood of exaltation, looked for the stick which was to support his still tottering steps in an expedition from which he hoped to return triumphant, bearing the proofs of the innocence of his ungrateful friend.

Thus Dr. Ross, who just then came into the hut, received a warm welcome when he suggested proceeding with the necessary dressing.

"Throw physic to the dogs," squeaked Chéri-Bibi in his face. "Keep your purges and plasters for civilised people, as the saying goes. Cure them if you can with your remedies. Every man to his liking. As for me, I attend society as best I can with my jemmy and also—shut your ears, Nut, for what must be done must be done —with my knife, which I drive into the flesh up to the hilt."

CHAPTER X

CARDS ON THE TABLE

To escape from one morass only to sink into another is an exhausting piece of gymnastics even to a man of the most vigorous constitution. Few men would have been capable of bearing the strain of the aggregate of emotions which had crowded upon the Nut since the day when he seemed to have reached the threshold of a new life.

The years spent in the convict settlement had rendered him impervious to outside influences, but his mind wavered at times and might have entirely given way if, through the vicissitudes of a life of deception and horror, the sudden gleam of light which emanated from Nina Noha's pearls had not penetrated the murky darkness with a ray of hope.

It was to this ray of hope that his thoughts recurred. The fresh blows struck by de Gorbio, the dreadful confidences made by Chéri-Bibi, everything which could add to his mental distress, or hasten the catastrophe,

threw him back once more on the dancer and her pearl necklace.

Unless his safety lay there, it would not be found anywhere.

That Nina had on the first occasion lied to him he no longer doubted. The thing was to discover her reason. Was she keeping back a part of the truth? In any case, he must see the necklace again, come what may. For that, he was prepared to go to all lengths.

The more she attempted to hide it from him, the more fiercely and imperatively he was drawn by the hope which it represented.

Nina received him this time with a quizzical expression of impatience, but he was not troubled by it. He had a stern and obstinate look on his face.

"Yes, madame, I have come back to speak to you about the necklace. Why not tell me where it is now?"

He had abandoned all subterfuge. In this way he hoped to entrap her, and force her to give him an explanation which would be final.

She at once dealt with him.

"You are very inquisitive, Monsieur Raoul de Saint-Dalmas."

He hardly gave a start.

He had asked himself many times since his first visit: "Did she know me?" and many times he said to himself: "Perhaps it would be better if she did know me."

He did not lower his head.

"Yes, Nina, it's I. Now that you have recognised me, perhaps you feel sorry for me."

His voice trembled with a wild hope and contained a note of entreaty which would have touched the heart of anyone save Nina Noha. But the dancer in her absorbing egotism could look upon sorrow only in order to delight in it.

Nina had no need of an explanation from him to realise the misery in which he was struggling, first because the misery was in part her work, and next because de Gorbio had sufficiently enlightened her.

She was fully aware of everything that had happened the night before at the Villa Thalassa, and it caused her immense pleasure to see her old friend, hunted down by de Gorbio, hasten to her as his last resource against that same de Gorbio with whom she was so intimately associated.

She had a hold on both of them! And she presided with splendid calm, impassive but interested, over the fierce tragedy of which she was the pivot. This cruelty which was natural to Nina had nothing to do with the justice of the case.

She had no reason to feel any hatred for the man who had ruined himself for her and, as she knew, was innocent of the murder which had deprived him of ten years of his life, and now impelled him to hide

himself under the heroic figure of Didier d'Haumont.

She loved the sight of suffering in others for its own sake. And she had to admit that in this case it was suffering of an exceptional character

To anyone who watched this woman at the moment when, lying listlessly on the sofa, she furtively eyed the hapless man who was making an eager and desperate appeal to her, it was obvious that she derived from the scene a certain sense of enjoyment.

With rare subtlety she prolonged the pleasure.

"Is it possible," she said, pulling the skirt of her robe over her form which had at one time bewitched Raoul de Saint-Dalmas, "that Captain d'Haumont, the son-in-law of the influential M. de la Boulays, needs anyone to be sorry for him?"

"Yes, I want everybody to be sorry for me," Didier exclaimed. "Because Raoul de Saint-Dalmas loved you, Nina, and you made him suffer greatly in the days of his blind youth long ago, and, most of all, because he was convicted of a murder which he did not commit. . . . Nina, you never loved me, but you know what a decent youngster I was when we were friends. You know quite well that I was incapable of doing harm to anyone and that I had nothing to do with Reynaud's murder.

I ask you, Nina—did you believe me guilty ? "

He stood before her, breathing quickly, pleading his cause as if he were before a judge upon whose decision his life and honour depended.

He wanted to have this woman on his side, this woman who knew where the necklace came from, this woman who had, perhaps, but to utter a single word to rescue him from the abyss.

" Did you believe me guilty ? " he repeated in a sob which seemed to express the martyrdom of ten years and the agony of that moment.

" I thought you were more to be pitied than blamed," she made answer in a languid tone which was almost kind, but did not entirely denote sorrow.

When he heard this reply, which was intended to be ambiguous, but which, in point of fact, was far from signifying any belief in his innocence, Didier felt an icy chill creep through his veins.

Nina was slipping away from him again. She was refusing to help him.

But he did not abandon the terrible game.

" Let's put all our cards on the table, Nina," he said, in an altered voice. " I am looking for proofs of my innocence. Your necklace is curiously like the one stolen from Reynaud the banker."

" Do you mean that ? " cried Nina.

with an admirable assumption of astonishment.

"I do mean it, and I could swear that it was the same one. The clasp has been altered, and the pearl with a flaw in it taken out, but I recognised the necklace."

"But, my dear sir, you must be dreaming. How could it be? . . ."

"Ah, how could it be! That's exactly what I have come here to ask you. If you tell me who gave it to you, you may put me on the track of the thief and murderer."

Nina seemed to be taking time to think. With her head resting on her hand, she wore a serious look on her face, as if she were intent upon what her secret thoughts told her.

Didier waited in an agony of suspense.

At last she made up her mind to speak.

"You shall know, my dear Raoul," she said, calling him by the name which she used when they were lovers, and thus filling him with a new hope, "You shall know the whole truth, because I can trust you."

Didier fell on his knees and took her icy-cold hand in his own burning hands.

What was she about to tell him? Was the word for which he was longing, the veritable sesame which would open the door of the future and close for ever the door

of the past—was that word to blossom forth from her painted lips?

"The necklace was given to me before the war by a foreign prince, and it is to this prince that I have sold it through the agency of a neutral," came from those painted and lying lips.

"His name?" cried Didier, with a gurgle in his throat.

"You will readily imagine that I don't want to risk being accused of trading with the enemy, and that I cannot give you the name."

Didier drew himself erect She was playing him false. His hope in her changed to a feeling of hatred. He loathed Nina Noha. And it was with dumb fury that he stared at her as she lay there in an attitude of voluptuous indifference.

He no longer heard the sound of her voice, which was saying:

"But, my dear fellow, you make a mistake to worry yourself about it. No one remembers that old story now."

"Yes, I remember it!" Didier rapped out with twitching lips, his eyes blazing with the hatred with which he was consumed. "I think of it every moment of my life, and I think of it to my cost. And I shall think of it until the day when the truth, the whole truth, about the awful story comes to light. Do you understand Nina? Until the whole truth is known, perhaps in spite of you."

She drew herself up in her turn with a terrible frown upon her face

"What do you mean? Is that a threat? Are you threatening me? Why, I have only to make a sign to have you sent back to the country from which you came."

Didier, distraught, passed his hand across his forehead on which a cold sweat had broken out He endeavoured to collect his thoughts.

"It's true, I'm going mad, but how can I help it in the face of your extraordinary answers."

"My extraordinary answers!"

"Tell me where the necklace is."

"But my necklace has nothing to do with your necklace."

"Perhaps you know the name of the real criminal."

This time the dancer could not avoid giving a start, but her agitation was over in a flash, and Didier did not even notice it.

"As to the guilty man," she declared, in a sharp, distinct voice. "I only know you. There's nothing to show that you are innocent. Please, therefore, do not say another word about the matter if you wish me to hold my tongue Let that be understood once for all, Monsieur Didier d'Haumont."

She was about to ring to have him shown

out when Zoé knocked at the door and brought in a visiting card.

"My dear fellow," she said, after looking at it, "it's Count de Gorbio, one of my best friends."

CHAPTER XI

JEALOUSY

WHILE these events were proceeding in Nice, Françoise remained at the Villa Thalassa a prey to an anxiety which since the previous evening had but increased.

She was still obsessed by the scene which had taken place between Didier and de Gorbio, and by the strange depression into which her husband had fallen afterwards, though she had admired the moral strength which he usually displayed in the most tragic circumstances.

She seemed to see still the Count's diabolical smile as he left the villa, for he did not suspect that she was watching him. Nor could she forget the demeanour of hatred and hostility in which she found the two men.

She was convinced that Didier had not told her the entire truth in his account of what had passed between them.

For the hundredth time she asked herself: "What can there be between the two men? Why did de Gorbio come here seeing that

he has such good reasons for keeping away ? " At that moment a servant came in to tell her that Madame d'Erlande and a lady friend had called.

" Did you say that I was at home ? "

" Madame d'Erlande told me that she had seen you in the garden."

Françoise had no liking for Madame d'Erlande. She found her spiteful, always ready to laugh at those who were supposed to be her best friends, taking a delight in spreading the most scandalous stories. Madame d'Erlande, moreover, was wonderfully well informed about everything and everybody, and since she possessed a caustic wit, some persons put up with her because they feared her, and others because she amused them.

Françoise was never amused by her, but she tolerated her. Was it a presentiment ? She went to receive her with a greater feeling of vexation and constraint than ever.

Nevertheless, as a woman of the world, Françoise composed her features, and the visit opened in an atmosphere of pleasant civilities and small talk.

Tea was served while they were gossiping.

They discussed the charitable fêtes which continued to follow one upon the other, and for which they invariably made a demand upon the inexhaustible good nature of the ladies.

Françoise mentioned that her husband

had undertaken to provide the programme for the next fête at Cimiez.

"Oh, that explains why Captain d'Haumont is always at Nina Noha's villa," broke out Madame d'Erlande, looking at her friend.

The effect was instantaneous. Though she would have given anything not to betray the emotion which shook her, Françoise's face broke into flame.

Didier at Nina Noha's villa! Françoise made some excuse to rise from her chair and to move some article in the room. She wished to appear to take the matter lightly and as of no consequence. In truth, however, she had to clutch the furniture to prevent herself from falling.

Didier always at Nina Noha's villa! It was not true. Madame d'Erlande was lying. Didier would not go to Nina Noha's villa.

Nina Noha was the last woman whose doorstep he would cross. Françoise felt sure of it, for she knew by heart the pleadings in the trial of Raoul de Saint-Dalmas. She knew what position that woman had occupied in Didier's life: the troubles that she had brought upon him. She knew, above all, that Didier must fear to be recognised by her.

And he was said to be always at her villa! Stuff and nonsense! A story like that could not be true. Or in that case. . . .

When Françoise came back again to Madame d'Erlande, the blood which flushed

her cheeks had left them, and she was as white as a sheet.

Madame d'Erlande and her friend did not appear to have noticed anything amiss, but went on talking between themselves unaffectedly and good-humouredly.

" I don't see why one cannot get up a charitable fête without this Nina Noha's assistance. She ceased to be a draw long ago. Personally, I consider that she has gone off a bit. What do you think, my dear Françoise ? "

" I think she's still pretty good," Françoise managed to answer.

" It's surprising how some women manage to wear so well, particularly in that circle. How do they do it ? "

" They lead a fast life."

" Does leading a fast life help one to wear well ? "

" Much more than working in the fields or at needlework or even at fancy needlework. If you look at respectable women of over thirty-five, they appear to be sixty," said Madame d'Erlande, and turning to Françoise : " So Captain d'Haumont has engaged Nina Noha ? "

" I'm sure I don't know," returned Françoise in a voice which she vainly strove to render natural. " It's as yet, perhaps, only an idea."

" Do you mean to say that Captain d'Haumont hasn't told you anything about it ? "

asked the friend. "Then he's preparing a surprise for you. I live near the house which Nina has rented for the winter, and I have frequently seen Captain d'Haumont calling there."

"We saw him going into the house just now," added Madame d'Erlande. "Oh, good gracious, what's the matter with you, Françoise. Surely we haven't upset you?"

"Upset me? What do you mean?"

"I hardly know. You have such a queer look about you. You are quite white. You're not jealous?"

"No one is ever jealous of a woman like Nina Noha," asserted her friend. "Why, she's an old woman, is Nina, and when one is young and beautiful and loved as you are. . . ."

"My dear, these new brides are wonderful. We have upset Madame d'Haumont."

"Not at all, I assure you," returned Françoise frigidly. "You haven't upset me, and make your minds easy, I am not jealous."

Madame d'Erlande was now feeling somewhat uncomfortable at the sight of Françoise's icy demeanour. She was anxious to take her departure. Moreover, she had nothing more to do at the Villa Thalassa. Her worthy task was finished. She found, however, means to put the finishing touches to it.

"I'm sure," interposed the friend, "that if that Nina Noha hadn't got all those jewels

with which she decks herself as if she were a shrine, no one would ever look at her. But men are such babies ! "

" You should say that to Count de Gorbio, my dear," said Madame d'Erlande.

" Why to Count de Gorbio ? " asked Françoise, turning her head.

" What ! Don't you know that Nina Noha is the Count de Gorbio's mistress ? It seems that he can refuse her nothing. For that matter she cannot refuse him anything, either, and it has been going on for some time."

They took their leave. Françoise found sufficient courage to accompany them as far as the garden. They were no sooner outside the garden gate than she ordered the car.

Her teeth were chattering. Not even on the day, or rather the dark night when she beheld her husband clasping in his arms the fearsome and demoniacal form of Chéri-Bibi, was she struck with greater horror.

Could it be true ? Could it be true ? Was her Didier still in love, and would he always be in love with Nina Noha ?

The dancer had caught him in her toils again !

The silent scenes which Françoise had witnessed during the last few days when Didier was in the slough of despair, his sudden cheerfulness, his rejoicing, which were unaccountable in the actual circumstances, his deceit towards her, the elation which

he displayed the day before on his return to the Villa Thalassa, and his casual explanation : " I've had a certain number of business worries. Don't let's talk about it "—all these things could be attributed to Nina Noha, either, of course, because she had welcomed or repulsed him.

It was awful ! Some men were exalted by sin and others abased by virtue. Confronted by this crime against her love, and her own credulity, Françoise wept bitter tears over her lack of comprehension. She now understood what had happened between de Gorbio and Didier. It was jealousy which had pitted the two men one against the other in her house, but the jealousy was not over her, as she had absurdly supposed, but over Nina Noha.

CHAPTER XII

INCIDENTS IN NINA NOHA'S HOUSE

DIDIER knew nothing of the relations which existed between de Gorbio and Nina Noha.

De Gorbio's visit to her, and the emphasis which she laid on the word "friend" came as a revelation to him and flung him into intense consternation, and he saw before him a new abyss.

"I know that your relations with the Count are somewhat strained. I think it will be better for you not to meet him here," she said.

Dazed by what he had heard and by this last stroke of fate, Didier was shown out by Zoé, unable to control his own movements, and allowing himself to be taken to the kitchen stairs. Thus he came out of the house by a door which, in the ordinary way, was used only by tradesmen and servants.

He walked through the garden without hearing a moan which broke out behind him and pursued him until he disappeared from sight.

Darkness had rapidly fallen.

What sorrow other than his own dwelt in the shadows round Nina Noha ?

Alas, it was the sorrowing Françoise who had come up to make sure that her cup of misery was full.

To be no longer in doubt as to the reality of the evil which is threatening one's happiness must come as a relief to the most courageous person whose mind is touched with suspicion, for such a person can have no rest until the truth is known. Françoise might have remained in suspense, but she preferred to meet, rather than to shrink, from the disaster which was hanging over her.

Leaving her car at the corner of the avenue, and hiding in a clump of trees in the garden of Nina Noha's villa, she watched Didier as he came out.

She, too, was unable to control her movements. Her grief and the imperious necessity to undergo further suffering led her to perform actions which are usually associated with the vulgarest passion.

Love to a certain extent knows nothing of the division of classes, though on the one hand there are persons who will not do certain things because " it is not good form," and, on the other, persons who let themselves go because they themselves are nearer to " nature."

Love quickly bridges the gulf which separates one class from another, and which

centuries of civilisation have gradually created. But there may come a time when the greatest lady, if she be really in love, may be caught listening behind the door.

Françoise had been in Nina Noha's garden for some minutes, and was breathless, shaking with excitement, and burning with shame, when de Gorbio came along and entered the dancer's house.

She recognised the Count, and made a gesture to stop him midway. The Count would meet Didier. Some terrible incident would ensue.

She thought for the moment only of the tragedy which would be enacted. She hastened to the door. She was about to enter when suddenly she asked herself : " Suppose Didier is not there ? "

For, after all, he might not be in the house. Was she to rely upon every piece of gossip uttered by Madame d'Erlande ?

A few words spoken by a woman known by everyone for her spiteful tongue, had sufficed to cause the splendid and heroic structure of her confidence in Didier to collapse under her, leaving her quivering, bruised, hopeless, beggared of love, hiding in the garden of a woman like Nina Noha !

And all the while, perhaps, Didier was at home waiting for her !

At that moment when she was about to rush home to him—for thus a woman's love

is blown about and veers with every shift of the wind as sailors might say—Didier came out by the tradesmen's entrance, driven into the darkness by a servant girl who was acting as an accomplice in the strange intrigue. And in the meantime de Gorbio entered the house as if he were the master of it. It was shameful! The abomination of desolation lay in the shadows of that night.

When Didier passed out of sight, Françoise dragged herself to the car. She had barely the strength to step in and give the order to drive to Cape Ferrat.

De Gorbio did not remain long with Nina. He seemed to be greatly preoccupied when he left her. Nina, on the other hand, wearied, doubtless, by her interview with Didier, went to bed early, and ordered Zoé not to allow her to be disturbed on any pretext.

She did not sleep. She turned over in her mind the new aspect of affairs, and, of course, the advantages which she and de Gorbio would be able to derive from their alliance—they would insist on them—with M. de la Boulays' son-in-law.

Her capricious mind possibly wandered to her experiences in the old days when the youthful Raoul was committing his early extravagances. How she had played with him! How she had made him suffer! How he loved her then! She had no need in those days to indulge in threats against him. He would have gone through fire and water

for her at a word. Her mere presence was enough to send him crazy.

Nina Noha was by no means pleased to realise that her power to charm had lessened to the extent that all her craft was unavailing with Raoul, who had become the indifferent Didier d'Haumont.

That, too, that in particular, was a slight for which she would make him pay.

Her reflections ceased at this point, and she was beginning to doze off when a peculiar noise attracted her attention.

It was like the grating of a file or saw upon metal. Now and then the sound stopped and was then resumed. At times it seemed somewhat distant, and at others quite near.

Apart from that sound, a great silence enveloped the house and the avenue. It was eleven o'clock at latest, she thought. The household must have retired for the night.

She was not frightened, but she had a feeling of uneasiness.

The pluckiest person, and Nina was no coward, may betray a certain alarm at night on hearing an incomprehensible sound.

The noise had now entirely ceased. As it was not renewed, Nina wondered if she were not the sport of her imagination.

She got out of bed, drew a small revolver from a drawer in the bedside table, and pushed the door ajar.

She had sharp ears, and she caught a faint

and stifled murmur of voices from the other end of the villa. It came, or it appeared to come, from her boudoir.

Her first thought was to lock herself in her bedroom and to ring and rouse the servants. And then suddenly a strange idea struck her; and without making the least sound, she boldly turned her steps to the boudoir.

With a quick movement she thrust open the door.

A number of muffled exclamations burst forth, and a rush was made at her. But in a distinct voice she said:

"Madame and messieurs, let me open the cabinet for you. It will be much simpler."

In point of fact, she had grasped the situation at a glance. A sort of Colossus was crouching before the cabinet and working on the metal part of the lock by the light of a dark lantern held by a woman whose features Nina could not at first distinguish. Near the balcony window stood another man keeping watch.

"Give me that toy first," commanded Chéri-Bibi, in a rough voice, "and we'll see afterwards if we can come to an understanding."

She raised no objection to placing the revolver on the cabinet. Chéri-Bibi at once put his huge paw on it.

"Unlock the cabinet and we won't do you any harm."

"It's very good of you," she returned. "As it happens, I have the key on me. But I can't see very well."

"I can't stand electric light," growled Chéri-Bibi in a thick voice. "Mademoiselle will show you a light."

"But her hand and the lantern are shaking," said Nina.

At the same time she clutched the hand and turned the light on to the face of the woman who was holding the lantern.

"Zoé!" she exclaimed.

"Madame, they threatened to kill me if I did not do what they told me."

"Poor child!" whispered Nina comically.

"I myself will show you a light," said Chéri-Bibi, "and not so much chatter, if you don't mind. Let's get on with it. I'm in a hurry."

"Yes, let's hurry up," muttered the Dodger, who was quaking on the balcony. "People are coming."

"Why, gentlemen, it's as easy as pat," said Nina, as she unlocked the cabinet.

Chéri-Bibi flung himself upon it, and at once a loud and dejected cry of "*Fatalitas!*" was heard.

The cabinet was empty.

CHAPTER XIII

VOICES IN THE STORM

DIDIER, as we have seen, in order to escape the blows which de Gorbio was preparing for him, returned to Nina Noha's house in the mad hope that he might find in her a weapon of defence.

And he came across de Gorbio himself!

The alliance between them, which was unsuspected by him until then, overwhelmed him, and in his misery he wandered about the deserted avenues round the villa not knowing what to do, nor where to go, nor even asking himself the question, for he was entirely unable to control his steps or the train of his thoughts.

He hoped that Nina, for whom he had so greatly suffered, would have compassion on him, and after recognising him, stretch out a friendly hand in order to assist him to escape from the great deep.

It was she who hurled him back again into it, for he could no longer doubt that it was she who had betrayed him to de Gorbio.

What did that man want of him ?

In the deadly whirlpool which was sweeping him away, in which he was turning dizzily in an increasingly narrow circle, whose centre was the dreaded convict settlement, from which he had tried by a superhuman effort to escape for ever, but to which, after four years, the forces of society, more formidable than the forces of nature, would infallibly send him back ; in this maelstrom in which he was struggling already partly submerged, he could cling for support only to de Gorbio, his bitterest enemy.

Poor, wretched, pitiable Didier !

He sought the friendly arm of Nina, and she showed him the hand of de Gorbio.

If he declined that hand, it was all over with him, all over with his happiness, all over with Françoise. But if he accepted its help, what would become of him when he was once in its clutches ?

De Gorbio ! What ignominy for a man, regenerated in the fire of twenty battles, to be in the power of a de Gorbio !

Oh, if he had not married Françoise ! She represented his most terrible punishment, just as she was his greatest though forbidden happiness. In the clear sky which he had glimpsed, she constituted his new fault. He was a brave man in battle, but a coward in love. And straightway threatening clouds had enveloped him. He no longer saw clearly before him.

He was now in the power of de Gorbio!

When he reached this point in his reflections, his body and soul shivering in the darkness of his misery, he observed de Gorbio coming towards him.

The Count was walking quickly, wrapped in a long cloak which covered his arms. He paid no heed to the solitary wayfarer. Didier had to stop him before he recognised him.

His whole body shrank back.

"Ah, it's you. What do you want with me?"

"It's for me to ask you that question, Monsieur de Gorbio."

"Here?"

"You can answer me here or elsewhere. Wherever you like, but answer me. Answer me as quickly as possible. You must understand that I can't go on living like this."

"I can see that you're worrying yourself a great deal. You make a mistake. Take it from me, you make a big mistake."

"Once more I ask you, I entreat you, to explain yourself."

"I haven't the time, my dear fellow. I'm taking the train to Paris this evening Wait until I come back."

"One word, one word now. My life is in your hands. I'm not a coward, and I'm not begging for mercy for myself, but I want to know at least whether I am to live or die. And if I am to live, on what conditions?"

"Come, come, my dear d'Haumont, you are working yourself up into a state of great excitement. Hang it all, pull yourself together. On my return we'll talk about this, and you'll see that we shall be the best of friends."

The Count, having flung out these words, plunged into the darkness, leaving Didier more alarmed by his assurances of friendship than he had been by his threats.

Like a child who is in pain Didier sighed: "Oh, dear!" and suddenly, in the midst of his distraction a figure appeared at his side, a figure which he knew.

"Will you give this note to the fisherman Sylvio, from Dr. Ross?"

So saying, the speaker, who was no other than Yoyo, slipped an envelope into his hand and vanished in the direction taken by de Gorbio.

A message for Chéri-Bibi! In his dejection the mysterious message seemed to him of good omen. At all events, it gave a new turn to his thoughts.

Since he fled from Sylvio's hut after uttering words of such dire import addressed to a friend who did not deserve them—for Chéri-Bibi's feelings and actions could not be measured by ordinary human standards—Didier deep down within him had a dull feeling of remorse.

He had been quick to condemn actions whose sole object was to save him; actions

steeped in blood which filled him with horror, but he, who was to benefit by them, he the friend of Chéri-Bibi the Scourge of Fate was not entitled to be the implacable judge of them.

Now he had an opportunity of returning to the poor fisherman's hut, to the man who had come to France solely to protect him. He would hold out his arms anew to him and ask his forgiveness.

Unfortunately, when Didier opened the door of the wretched hut which stood by the seashore, Chéri-Bibi was not in. He was still working for Didier, the ungrateful Didier. So, after leaving the letter, he took the road to the Villa Thalassa, his only harbour of refuge in the everlasting storm.

Françoise had returned home in an alarming mental condition. She locked herself in her bedroom after giving orders that she should not on any account be disturbed.

She could not cry aloud in the streets, she could not cry aloud before her chauffeur, she could not show her wounds to her servants. But now she could bewail her fate as she pleased, weep, choke with grief, beat her breast. No physical suffering can equal the pain inflicted by love, for the pain of love when it reaches a paroxysm is the worst of physical tortures, the proof of which is that life itself becomes unendurable.

Françoise wished that she were dead. She longed for death as a release, and she might,

perhaps, have taken her own life if she had not dropped into a swoon.

When she recovered consciousness she caught the sound of voices on the terrace in the garden.

Didier had just come in and was questioning the servants. She recognised his voice, and her sufferings began anew. She could not bear the sound of that voice.

It seemed to her, likewise, that it would be impossible to see him again, for she loved him still while he loved another.

Her own love, which she had so greatly exalted, seemed a noxious, a shameful thing.

She fled, fled from him, fled from herself, tore herself away, as it were, from the loving Françoise who waited every evening for her Didier; and who only asked perhaps to wait for him still, and to hear from him the most cowardly and abject of apologies after receiving some lying explanation.

Her clothes in disorder, she flew through the desolate gardens down the steps of the terrace, like a mad woman, and, reaching the high rocks, mingled her cries with the roaring of the sea. A storm was sweeping in from the east. Françoise escaped into the darkness and the storm, shouting: "Didier! Didier!"

Meantime Didier had made his way to his wife's room for he was by now greatly perturbed by the servants' reports. The confusion which met his eyes sent a shudder

through him. Françoise had disappeared. She had run away. The open doors indicated the way she had taken in her insensate flight.

He looked about for her in the garden. He found her wrap hanging to the balusters of the terrace which ran down to the beach. And he, too, plunged into the storm uttering loud cries.

He was convinced that de Gorbio had spoken. Françoise knew everything. She had made up her mind to die.

He searched for her. He called her. He shouted to the rocks and the waves of the sea : " Françoise ! Françoise ! "

But the storm drowned Françoise's voice still crying : " Didier ! Didier ! "

CHAPTER XIV

A FRIEND

At daybreak Didier was still on the beach, where he had remained filling the night with his despairing cries.

He was convinced that Françoise had drowned herself, and he was waiting for the light of day to reveal the body of her who could not survive the awful discovery that she was married to convict 3216. De Gorbio had, indeed, taken his revenge. He might well leave for Paris. He had nothing more to keep him at Nice. Françoise was dead, and Didier was about to die!

He would see his wife's beloved form once more, kiss and clasp her in his arms, and, laden with the mournful burden, he, too, would enter the sea and at last find peace.

With the coming of day the storm subsided. Didier hunted among the rocks. Masses of seaweed and rubbish cast up by the waves, often assumed fantastic shapes and guided his tottering footsteps.

He bent down and groped about the

accursed beach which had taken Françoise from him, and would not give her back.

Sailors in the fishing boats which were setting sail for the early morning's fishing were attracted by the sight of the wandering figure. They pointed him out to each other ; they hailed him.

Then he raised his head and perceived that nature, oblivious of the fury and tragedy of the night, was at rest, and getting ready one of its most beautiful days.

Capes and headlands were flushed with gold, and the sea with its softest sigh flowed back in curves to the deeps of the bays.

He could not bear the enchanting sight, which they had watched with delight during those happy mornings all too quickly over.

He hated this daylight which she could no longer see.

Stumbling over the rocks like a madman, he retraced his steps and sped along the path leading to the house which he had left for ever. He was returning only to seek a violent death which would deliver him from the gladness of nature for ever being revivified but for ever indifferent.

He managed to defeat the anxious curiosity of the servants, and had already placed his hand in the drawer, and was clutching the weapon which would set him free, when he heard a voice from behind the closed shutters.

"For Captain d'Haumont. Give it to him at once. It is urgent."

An urgent message at that early hour! His hand shook and he dropped the weapon, while his heart for a moment ceased to beat. And then suddenly, as he heard the explanations which were being made a few paces away from him, life came back to him.

"The master? We haven't seen him. No one is at the villa."

He opened the window. His appearance was so abrupt and threatening that the men in the garden shrank back.

But he had already seized the letter. It was from Madame Martens. He read it:—

"Come at once. Françoise is staying with me. She is distracted. She thinks that you have deceived her with Nina Noha."

Françoise was alive! Françoise was alive! The sun was shining again! Didier shouted with joy. Françoise thought that he had deceived her with Nina Noha. How he laughed. He laughed uproariously, and then even his laughter sobered down. He laughed now like a child at the thought that she could imagine such a thing. And he wept. And, weeping for joy, he put on his cloak without even taking the trouble to change his clothes.

He threw himself into the motor car which brought Madame Martens' servant.

When he reached the house, Madame Martens at once came to meet him.

"Françoise? Where is Françoise?" he cried.

Madame Martens explained matters in a few brief sentences.

"She saw you coming out of Nina Noha's house, and she is convinced that it was because of him that de Gorbio was jealous and picked a quarrel with you."

"Why, it's ridiculous. It's senseless. You know what I went to see Nina Noha about."

"Yes, I know, but I can't tell her."

"Neither can I tell her. What must I say to her? What must I do?"

"Anything you please. She idolises you, and will believe you. Oh, my dears, you are upsetting yourselves terribly. What a state you are in, both of you! She was like a madwoman all night."

"And I was searching for her all night."

"She is grieving because she hadn't the courage to face death. She wanted to throw herself into the sea. She told me that she tried to do so, but the sea wouldn't have her."

"Take me to her."

"No, go to her. Talk to her. She vowed to me never to see you again. I have tried to no purpose to argue with her. Only your love for her can assuage such grief."

Madame Martens pointed to a door, and

Didier entered the room in which Françoise remained, sullen and silent, too fatigued, perhaps, to shed any more tears.

As soon as her eyes fell upon him, she was on her feet and uttered a great cry.

"No, not you. Go away. I don't want to see you again."

Didier, trying to speak, in vain caught hold of her. She struggled, drowning his voice with her cries.

"Spare me your excuses. I don't want any of your explanations. You don't love me. You never have loved me."

"At least look and see what you have made of me since last night, and say again that I don't love you."

She looked at him. He had thrown off his cloak. She saw his tatters and his wounds, for he had come out of the night, his clothes stained with blood. She, too, was a pitiable sight. He gazed at her for some moments, and their mutual sobs brought them together.

"Why did you go to see Nina Noha?"

"Françoise, my love, how can you doubt me?" murmured Didier.

"Why did you go to see Nina Noha?"

"What can you be thinking about? You know that I love you. Let that be enough for you. Otherwise our love would be marred or, at least, desecrated, by any explanation about such a woman."

"But you went to her house. Why did you go to see her?"

"You hurt me very much, my dearest, by asking these questions. You know very well why I went to see her. Madame Martens must have told you. I went there about that charitable fête."

"You've been there several times without saying anything to me about it."

She looked at him, her eyes flashing with tears; the devouring flame of jealousy broke out again. She turned away from him and said breathlessly:

"You must swear to me on our love that you had no other reason for calling on Nina Noha. But, stay, why should you swear anything? I simply ask you to give me your word as an honest man that you had no other reason for seeing Nina Noha."

A silence ensued.

"There, you see," she exclaimed, "you had some other reason."

"Yes," said Didier, at last lowering his head. "I admit that I had another reason."

"What was it?"

"I can't tell you."

These last words were spoken in a tone of such sorrow that Françoise, forgetting for a moment the pitiful feelings under which she was labouring, was impressed by them. She gazed at the face which bore so many traces of suffering, the secret of which she had not, perhaps, entirely fathomed, and she wavered.

"Don't ask me anything," went on Didier,

shaking his head. "The secret is not mine to tell. It is the secret of a man who once loved Nina Noha. He had entrusted me with an important errand to her. But you . . . you . . . how could you doubt my love for you?"

It was the secret of a man who once loved Nina Noha!

Françoise knew the man. He stood before her. It was she, Françoise, whom he now loved. Could she doubt it? At that juncture Madame Martens came in.

"Well, my dear Françoise, have you made it up? You know perfectly well that he is devoted to you."

"Yes," she returned in deep and solemn tones. "I believe it. I believe it firmly. But I ask him not to see Nina Noha any more."

Didier nodded his head in promise. And Madame Martens, laughing in a friendly way at Françoise, went on:

"It's very naughty of you to be so jealous."

"Yes, I am jealous—insanely jealous," returned Françoise.

CHAPTER XV

THE LITTLE HOUSE IN THE RUE DE DUNKERQUE.

Count Stanislas de Gorbio possessed a luxurious flat, known to all Paris, at the corner of the Rue Lesueur and the Avenue du Bois. It was not, however, to this sumptuous abode that he made his way when he reached Paris. He had travelled in a compartment with Dr. Ross, whom he met at the station. They lunched together on the train. The Count did not for a moment leave go of a small bag on which, whenever Yoyo had the opportunity without being seen, he cast longing eyes. The little bag contained the famous necklace.

In the face of Didier's persistence, and the danger which that persistence involved, Nina persuaded the Count, who was about to set out for Paris, to take the necklace with him and to conceal it in a spot, known only to themselves, in which they were accustomed to hide their most valuable papers. How was it that Yoyo knew all about it? In the simplest possible manner.

Sent by Chéri-Bibi to Nina Noha's place to act as scout before his last expedition to the villa, Yoyo, adapting the cunning and resource acquired in his native forests, to more civilised surroundings, was able to spy upon every movement of the two accomplices. Concealed between the two curtains of a glass door, he discovered the nature of the errand with which Nina had entrusted de Gorbio, and, being fully aware of the scheme which Chéri-Bibi was plotting against her, took it upon himself to follow the Count. On his way, as we have seen, he seized the opportunity of letting Chéri-Bibi know what he was doing through Didier, whom he met wandering round the house like a lost soul.

When they reached Paris, de Gorbio and Ross parted. Yoyo noticed that no one met the Count, who took a taxi from the rank. Yoyo engaged the driver of another taxi, and paid him a good fee to follow the first taxi. At the corner of the Boulevard Magenta and the Boulevard Strasburg the Count alighted from his taxi, and Yoyo did likewise.

The Count went on foot towards the North station still wearing his travelling cloak, under which he was carrying the small bag. Yoyo followed him. Soon de Gorbio came to the Rue de Dunkerque and slackened his pace. He appeared to be a lounger with no other object than to look in the shop

windows. Thus he reached a small, old, two-storied house which stood at the corner of the street, of which one side cutting across the angle was occupied, on the ground floor, by a restaurant of somewhat dubious appearance. The ground floor of that part of the house which faced the Rue de Dunkerque was taken up entirely by a shop for the sale of curiosities.

The Count stopped outside this shop as though the queer collection which filled the windows interested him. As a matter of fact, he entered the shop a few minutes later, and could be seen from the street discussing with the proprietor the merits of some antique golden horror which they turned round and round, making the most of it in the dim light. Then the two men disappeared into the darkness at the back of the shop, and could not be seen any more.

Yoyo, making sure that the shop was empty, took advantage of the fact to slip into it. Once inside, he could no longer be seen as he crawled among a hundred articles. His body became merged in the semi-darkness. Though the shop was lumbered up, he crept forward without disturbing or moving any article of furniture, and without making the least sound. He was once more the red-skin on the warpath.

The door of the room behind the shop was left ajar. The two men were still in

this small, dingy room, the light in which came through a casement window overlooking a courtyard. The proprietor of the shop lit a small lamp, and handed it, without saying a word, to de Gorbio. Then he lifted a trap-door, and by the light of the lamp, de Gorbio went down a narrow staircase leading to the cellar. As he was disappearing from view, he made a sign to the proprietor to return to the shop. The man at once did what he was told, passing close to Yoyo.

The shopkeeper wore a hang-dog look. Yoyo took a dislike to him at the first glance, but he had other things to do than study the man's physiognomy. He slipped into the room at the back of the shop and crawled down the cellar stairs on all fours like a cat. His scheme, for that matter, was the scheme of a savage in its simplicity. If de Gorbio turned his head and caught sight of him, he would leap upon him like a tiger and choke the life out of him before he could take breath. But de Gorbio did not notice him. He was intent upon his task which was to open a cellar door fastened by a complicated safety lock. As soon as he opened the door, he went in and closed it behind him. The whole thing was done in a few seconds, and Yoyo arrived just in time to see de Gorbio open and close the door. Yoyo at once flattened his ear against the door, but caught only the faintest sounds such as the noise caused by the rattle of

small chains. He remained standing thus for five minutes, after which he threw himself quickly in the angle of the staircase, lying flat on the floor, his head turned towards the Count, ready, if needs be, to spring upon him. But de Gorbio did not discern him as he left the cellar any more than he had done before he went into it. He quietly closed the door.

Yoyo smiled to himself in the partial gloom. His eyes had alighted upon a narrow opening above the door which he would be able to turn to good account.

A moment later the Count was up in the shop again, and the cellar flap was lowered. Yoyo could set to work undisturbed. Nevertheless, it was no small task. The things which the Count had so unexpectedly concealed in this cellar must possess in his eyes no ordinary value.

Yoyo had to effect an entrance come what might. Disregarding the first door and its lock, he shot through the partly-open airhole above the barrier at one bound and dropped outside a second door locked in the same complicated fashion.

Yoyo accomplished his work only by sawing through the wood round the lock with one of those pocket tools the value of which he had learned in his association with his white friends in Guiana ; tools which Chéri-Bibi's friends were never without in view of the exigencies of their existence.

The work needed time. At last Yoyo entered the cellar. He had with him, naturally, his electric lamp, as befits a redskin who is familiar with the benefits of civilisation.

He made a tour of the cellar. It was of considerable size, but there was nothing in it to differentiate it from any other cellar. It contained a certain amount of rubbish, a few rotten shelves, the remains of some coal, and half a dozen hogsheads and barrels. Two of the barrels were full as Yoyo was able to ascertain when, with an effort, he moved them. Yoyo moved everything. He hunted everywhere. He examined the place thoroughly. He felt neither fatigue nor hunger nor thirst, nor the desire to sleep. He left the cellar without discovering the least thing.

It was not a question of merely getting out of the cellar, but also of leaving the shop. It took him another half day before he was able to escape, but he did not grudge the time.

After lifting the cellar flap and worming himself into the shop, he had an opportunity of listening to odds and ends of most interesting conversation between the shopkeeper and his singular customers. All sorts of persons came in, apparently belonging to every strata of society, but whether they were dressed as the lowest kind of dealer in antiques or as the newly rich seeking out old

furniture, they had one thing in common, namely, that after a short discussion about the price of certain articles, they lowered their voices and spoke of other things.

In general, it was the proprietor who put them at their ease:

"It's all right. Go ahead. Nobody's in the shop."

And the customer went ahead! More often than not he brought a document and followed it up with certain injunctions. He put questions to which the worthy Monsieur Punaise—for such they called the proprietor—answered or not, as the fancy took him.

They often spoke of No. 1. "Has No. 1 come?" "When shall we see No. 1 again?" "There are certain things that I can only tell No. 1." "I shall have to undertake the journey to Nice if No. 1 does not come soon." Thus Yoyo had little difficulty in concluding that No. 1 was Count de Gorbio himself.

Something also was said about "the lady," and Yoyo gathered from these remarks who the lady referred to was.

Sometimes M. Punaise admitted that the Count was in Paris, and sometimes he swore that he was not.

He must have possessed the full confidence of his master and held a position of some importance in the business house of de Gorbio, Nina Noha and Co.

The affair seemed to be managed with

rare intelligence. To begin with, the fact of choosing as a place of business and the starting point of their organisation, an old curiosity shop, was evidence that they had thought of everything. Any person, whether he wore a cap or a silk hat, could enter the shop without causing the least surprise.

Yoyo believed that he had nothing further to learn in M. Punaise's shop, and prepared to avail himself of the shopkeeper's inattention and the half-open door to make his escape, hoping to return when he had satisfied his hunger, which, during the last two days, had been torturing his inner man.

He was already on all fours concealed by the shadows of the falling night, when he noticed the movements to and fro of half a dozen young persons of ill-favoured appearance who went past the shop, threw a glance into it, and then entered the public-house at the corner.

Yoyo soon became aware of the interest which the shopkeeper displayed in watching, through his window, the actions of those gentlemen.

Darkness had now completely fallen and the red-skin was able to leave the shop without attracting attention, but becoming increasingly perplexed by these manœuvres, he was careful not to go away. Accordingly, he stood in the porch which formed the entrance to the courtyard of the old house, and witnessed the quick colloquy which took

place between M. Punaise and one of the hooligans who, after entering the public-house, emerged from it again almost immediately.

From the few words which Yoyo was able to overhear, he was satisfied, beyond the possibility of doubt, that the best relations existed between the old curiosity shop and the tap-room at the corner of the Rue de Dunkerque.

Yoyo did not hesitate. When the two men parted and the shopkeeper locked up his shop, the red-skin followed the hooligan into the tap-room.

If the existence which he had borne during the last two days be remembered, it will be realised that Yoyo's appearance "was against him." His clothes were torn, his linen had lost its colour, his cheeks were hollow, his eyes were dilated, while his long hair and the labours which had exhausted his entire being, indicated at a first glance that he belonged to the dregs of humanity.

His appearance upon this "special" scene, which was made up for the most part of persons who had been "in trouble," roused, therefore, no suspicion. It would be nearer the truth to say that it stimulated a certain degree of interest.

Yoyo would have found it difficult to explain his dilapidated condition if he had taken out of his pocket any of the bank notes with which it was filled.

He stated, therefore, that he was without a sou, dying of hunger and thirst, and ready to sell his soul for a crust of bread and a drink.

The chances were that at any other time he would have been thrown out after such an utterance, but he came at a moment when those gentlemen were enlisting men who were willing, for a job about which no explanations were given.

The proprietor, a big, square-shouldered old fellow, shining with obesity, his biceps standing out under his turned-up shirt-sleeves, paid Yoyo every attention. He questioned him while lavishing his favours on him.

He guessed that he was a South American, a native of the Argentine, who was down on his luck. Yoyo did not undeceive him. At midnight Yoyo, who was himself again, became a member of the gang, and was drinking gaily with his new companions.

CHAPTER XVI

CHÉRI-BIBI'S NEW PROFESSION

Not far from Nina's flat in the Rue Lesueur in Paris, and a few steps from the Avenue de la Grande Armèe was a mean-looking coal merchant's shop standing between a herbalist's which was closed during the war, and a cheesemonger's which was making a fortune.

It was a veritable hole containing a counter, a few bottles on shelves, and some half a dozen bundles of wood in a dark corner.

The coalman, a worthy native of Auvergne, had joined the army, leaving his business in the hands of a young wife, who had been obliged to sell the place.

A purchaser came forward, contrary to every expectation, and the business, which was of little or no value, was bought for four thousand francs, " cash on the nail."

In the neighbourhood the buyer was regarded, at first, as a maniac. He was, for that matter, an extremely eccentric individual. He spent his time when he was in the shop, which was not very often, in gossiping with

friends who came to see him from no one knew where.

The cheesemonger, who was making his fortune while complaining of hard times, explained the mystery to his friends round about. The coalman was a member of a set of speculators who cared but little for trading at the shop, and who made " hundreds and thousands " by cornering various goods on a big scale.

From that time the coalman, who had been under suspicion, was respected by everyone, and was called " Monsieur Talboche," no one grudging the " Monsieur." It was Chéri-Bibi.

M. Talboche was away from his shop for weeks together. When he became visible once more, the neighbours congratulated him on his appearance, though he had the face of a man who might have done away with his father and mother ; but people are so constituted that they admire cunning to the extent of finding it attractive.

After an absence which, on this occasion, had lasted a particularly long time, M. Talboche returned, bringing with him a young girl and a tall, lean old fellow who had not been seen in the district before. And gossips began to let their tongues wag when, on the same evening, a well-known figure hove in sight on the coal-shop's horizon : a figure whose appearance was more dubious than ever. He was called the

cowboy because of his resemblance to the "wild men of America," and, of course, he was assumed to have at his command the entire supply of coal in the United States.

The cowboy was accompanied by a person whose appearance was even more dubious than his own, but with whom he seemed to be on the best of terms.

They must have made several calls at various tap-rooms on their way, and they entered M. Talboche's shop in merry mood, obviously intending to complete the round.

Chéri-Bibi was not surprised when he saw Yoyo come in. He was expecting him.

The young girl, who had not been told of his coming, showed extreme pleasure and threw her arms round the cowboy's neck. Whereupon the third person, who lay grumbling on the few bundles of wood in the corner of the shop, gave a start and protested vigorously against such an indelicate sight in a place kept by a man who had always boasted of his devotion to and support of good morals.

But Chéri-Bibi had other things to do than to listen to the Dodger's jeremiads. On a sign from Yoyo, the temporary coalman went into his room at the back, and shut himself up with the cowboy and his new chum.

The conversation must have been particularly interesting, for it was continued well into the evening, and was only broken

off when Chéri-Bibi took the trouble to fetch a full bottle after the one that he had brought in was empty.

Zoé during this time was cleaning glasses, putting the place, as it were, in order, and endeavouring to make herself useful.

Hilaire, on the other hand, was in the sulks. For that matter, since his return to Paris, which occurred the night before, no one would touch him with a pair of tongs.

Although he would not admit it, he could not help reflecting, in spite of his sworn devotion to Chéri-Bibi, that his shop in the Rue Saint Roch was very much more comfortable than the coal-hole kept by M. Talboche.

Finally, it was not the present conduct of Zoé or of Yoyo which could make him forget that not far away, in other words, not more than ten minutes by the Paris underground railway, he possessed an excellent wife who was in deep mourning, and continued to set a good example to the Rue Saint Roch by the persistence of her grief; for M. Hilaire had received tidings of his better half. Madame Hilaire, as the result of her adventure in Nice, had commenced divorce proceedings against her husband, but when she learnt of his death while acting as chauffeur to M. Saynthine, she displayed a most edifying sorrow. She still, so M. Hilaire heard, kissed his photograph and bedewed it with her tears. At that moment

M. Hilaire was ready to let bygones be bygones. . .

When night came it was as it happened abominable weather. The rain, which froze as it fell, beat sharply against the windows.

Chéri-Bibi forgot all about supper, and Hilaire's stomach was as depressed as his mind. He would not even look at the young Zoé, he felt so annoyed with her for her ingratitude. And what were Chéri-Bibi and the others doing by chattering for such a long time in that room ?

Suddenly Hilaire's face wore a bright look. Possibly Yoyo had traced the necklace, for he alone was on the right track. They had returned to Paris, doubtless, only because Yoyo had discovered the necklace. But in that case. . . in that case. . . it would be the end of his troubles. Chéri-Bibi would allow him to get away. It was a promise. He had sworn to it.

Hilaire reached this point in his reflections when the door at the back was opened. Notwithstanding the many drinks with which the hooligan had been provided by his host, he appeared to be less tipsy when he came out than when he went in.

He shook Chéri-Bibi by the hand with evident satisfaction.

" I believe between us we've just pulled off a good stroke of business," he said.

" I believe so," returned Chéri-Bibi.

The man went off.

"There's a pal," explained Chéri-Bibi. "We were made to understand each other."

"That fellow has never been in the coal trade," groaned the Dodger.

"No, but he's a 'lifer' such as we more often meet near the river Oyapok than near the Opera House, my dear old Dodger, unless by chance we happen to be near a certain grocery stores."

"Yes, Monsieur le Marq. . . . I won't pursue the subject. And what are we going to do now?"

"Now you're asking something."

"That'll do. I understand Monsieur le Marq. . . I'll go and make my will."

"You forget, Monsieur Hilaire, that you are already dead."

After that Hilaire "went like a lamb" without attempting to understand, and still more without raising any objections or giving utterance to any of those lamentations which brought down upon him such sharp reproofs from Chéri-Bibi. Nevertheless he counted the days as they passed. Two had already elapsed, and nothing out of the way happened except that M. Talboche changed his residence. He moved his business from the Rue Lesueur to the courtyard of a small house in the Rue de Dunkerque.

The entire house was under the Count's command. It was occupied by the cleverest rascals in his pay, and deliberately prepared as a fortress, capable if needs be of sustaining

a siege, and it harboured a small gang of desperate characters whose headquarters were with M. Miche who was the concierge's husband and the licensee of the bar.

At every hour of the day and night some members of the gang were "on duty" at M. Miche's place which enabled them to meet every emergency.

Chéri-Bibi under the tutelage of Yoyo and his new friend, was a sort of lieutenant in the gang, and pompously called himself "the major," soon made acquaintance with M. Miche, his stores, his drinks and his peculiar customers.

He supplied the bar with coal and got to know all about his cellar. But M. Miche was on his guard, and never allowed anyone to go down into the basement alone. He accompanied Chéri-Bibi every step of the way until the last sack was emptied, and then followed him upstairs and let down the cellar flap which was behind the counter.

When Chéri-Bibi was not at M. Miche's place he spent his time in the cellars, ostensibly because of his trade as coal merchant in which he was assisted by Yoyo and sometimes by Zoé. The proprietor of the old curiosity shop, however, was the only one who did not obtain his coal from M. Talboche.

M. Punaise used gas fires. Chéri-Bibi went into M. Miche's cellar hoping in this way to effect an entrance into M. Punaise's cellar,

for Yoyo had discovered that there was a direct passage between the two.

The mystery of the disappearance of the necklace might perhaps be elucidated by means of that passage.

In any event it was in M. Punaise's and M. Miche's basements that he would have to set to work if any importance was to be attached to Yoyo's words. Chéri-Bibi believed that Yoyo had looked in the wrong place, and he himself would have better luck.

M. Talboche tried to open up a friendship between himself and M. Punaise, but at the first reference to delivering coal into the cellar the latter coolly showed him the door without entering into any explanation. The concierge herself, the worthy Madame Miche, having received a hint from M. Punaise, gave him to understand that he must leave M. Punaise alone.

Chéri-Bibi's hopes, therefore, turned once more to the public-house keeper's cellar. He determined to make some definite attempt on the evening of the third day.

The Dodger guessed that matters were now about to move quickly. Chéri-Bibi closed his shop early, and brought out from a hamper one of those tasty suppers which he was in the habit of providing when it was a question of putting a little pluck into them for some fearsome work in the night.

Chéri-Bibi alone was in high spirits. Yoyo contrary to his usual character wore a gloomy

look as also did Zoé. The Dodger was in a pitiable state.

"Come on my friends. Pull yourselves together," said Chéri-Bibi. "We shall soon meet again."

"Are we going to part company?" stammered the Dodger filled with a new hope.

"I'm speaking of the lovers, my dear Dodger. I wasn't referring to you. You are too old. I was speaking of Yoyo and Zoé, who are engaged to be married."

"Oh, yes. There we have a charming story," murmured the Dodger with a look which he vainly strove to make unconcerned, but which betrayed his wounded pride. "After all it was only to be expected. A girl from the streets might well come to an understanding with a big fellow from the forest. They will make a fine couple when they go before the mayor. I invite myself to the wedding to drink their health."

"You can't do anything better," said Chéri-Bibi pouring out a glass of champagne all round. "As far as I am concerned," he went on in the emphatic tones which the Dodger had known for so many years, "I'm very glad to see an honest love affair blossom forth under my roof. It is much more pleasant than to watch the grimaces of an old monkey like yourself, my dear Dodger. Come, don't be upset. You'll soon have the joy of taking Virginie to your heart again."

"Really," grunted the Dodger. "If I am

much longer about it the poor thing will have died of grief."

"Meanwhile I'll tell you what you are going to do. Are you listening, Dodger?"

"Am I listening!"

"Yoyo has got to leave us this very evening. That's why he looks so glum."

"Indeed. Isn't he taking his—intended—with him?"

"No. You'll have to look after her."

"Me? That's a bit too thick. No. I won't undertake a job like that."

"Yes, you will undertake the job," declared Chéri-Bibi with authority, "I tell you so, and besides it's only fair. Here's a decent chap who wants to get married, and I send him off to Nice on our business, so it's the least you can do for him."

"Is there still business of yours to be done in Nice?" asked Hilaire in visible anxiety.

"De Gorbio has just returned to Nice. You see, I am sending Yoyo there though he would be only too pleased to stay here. Do you want to go in his place?"

"No. I'll stay behind. That'll suit me. And I will see that Mlle. Zoé is treated with consideration."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Well, off with you, Yoyo, if you don't want to miss the train."

Yoyo kissed Zoé who displayed some emotion at his departure.

After this affecting scene, and when Yoyo was gone, Chéri-Bibi stood up and silently stuffed his pockets with certain working tools which the Dodger looked upon as of the highest significance.

"It's for to-night, right enough," he groaned to himself. "Heaven be with us! Perhaps I made a mistake not to go to Nice instead of Yoyo."

Chéri-Bibi finished his preparations, coughed, tapped the Dodger on the shoulder and said:

"Let's clear out."

"Yes, let's clear out." The Dodger knew what "clearing out" meant.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Not far. We'll have a drink at M. Miche's."

"Nice friend your M. Miche," grumbled the Dodger. "When I've had a good brand of champagne with M. Talboche, I look upon it as a come down to go and have a drink at M. Miche's bar. However that may be, I'm at your disposal M. Talboche."

He stopped short, scared at the audacity of his own words, and the look which Chéri-Bibi flashed at him.

"Listen to my instructions, Dodger my boy."

"Yes Monsieur le Marq. . ."

"To-night you're going to get drunk with the gang. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Marq. . ."

"Call me Monsieur Talboche."

"Yes, Monsieur Talboche."

"And if by chance some fellow fails to behave properly to Zoé, you'll knock him down."

"All right, Monsieur Talboche, but you'll come to my assistance."

"No, because I shan't be there."

"Then I'm a dead man and for good this time," muttered the Dodger. "Just think. I shall have the lot of them jumping on me at once. Look here, Monsieur Talboche, there's one thing that would get out of the difficulty. We've only got to leave Mlle. Zoé here. It's after ten o'clock, and it's not the thing for girls who are engaged to be married to be out at this time of night."

"You've no luck with your 'arguments,' Monsieur Hilaire," returned Chéri-Bibi in the icy tones which always froze the words on the lips of the persons addressing him. "You must know that I am taking Mlle. Zoé out so that those fellows may fail in respect to her and give you an opportunity of making them respect her. You promised our friend Yoyo to do so. Did you or did you not promise—yes or no, Monsieur Hilaire? And are we to attach no importance to your promises?"

Hilaire had nothing more to say. He grasped the fact that Chéri-Bibi for his own purposes needed to pick a quarrel at M. Miche's bar that evening, the consequences

of which might be extremely unpleasant for himself. But he thought it useless to pursue the subject, and on a sign from Chéri-Bibi offered Zoé his arm.

"Congratulations Monsieur Hilaire," said Chéri-Bibi, locking the shop door which gave on to the courtyard. "You are acting like a gentleman. If your friend Yoyo saw you now he would be quite satisfied."

The hour at which, legally, M. Miche's tap-room should be closed was long past, but as may be imagined, the company was never so brilliant as after that hour.

There were certain ways of obtaining admission to the place known to the initiates, especially the persons living in the court. M. Talboche, M. Hilaire, and Mlle. Zoé were shown in specially through the pantry. Zoé had never before been inside the door. Her curiosity, as usual, mastered her fear of accidents, wherein she differed greatly from the worthy M. Hilaire. She passed as M. Talboche's niece; and it was known that Yoyo and the Dodger were at loggerheads over her, and kept a close watch upon her.

Her arrival caused a sensation, and she was received with a flattering murmur of approval.

"Someone was saying just now that no ladies were present to-night," observed a man in a drunken voice.

Monsieur Miche standing behind the bar,

bowed politely. Since the coalman had taken up his quarters in the court, he, too had treated Zoé with marked attention. He bustled about her, and after leading the newcomers to their seats, himself wiped the table with his napkin.

The doubtful characters in the room would have been nothing loath to rub shoulders with the girl's companions, but while the look of confusion on the Dodger's face lent itself to practical jokes, the startling expression which was the characteristic of Chéri-Bibi, even in repose, gave them pause.

It was Zoé who took the initiative by making a tour of the enemy's camp. She must have received her instructions from her Uncle Talboche. Be that as it may, when she suddenly rose to her feet to go and watch a game of dice which was being played on the counter, the Dodger unconsciously fearing complications which he still dreaded, though he knew that they were necessary, tried to hold her back. But Chéri-Bibi caught his chum by the wrist and whispered : " Leave her alone."

Zoé wished to take a hand in the game. The gamblers made way for her as though she were a queen.

Meantime Chéri-Bibi and Hilaire, to whom no one paid any further attention, exchanged a few useful and final remarks.

Suddenly Chéri-Bibi said to the Dodger : " Go ! "

The Dodger grew pale, but at a terrible look from his master, he stood up.

It must be said that at that moment M. Miche had just finished a game with Zoé, which she lost, in which the stake was a kiss ; and he kissed the charming girl full on the lips.

Now or never was the opportunity to interfere if the Dodger, the sworn guardian of the honour of Yoyo's future wife, was to keep his promise. He had not sought the occasion and at the sight of that stalwart man holding the fragile child in his arms, he felt an inclination to turn tail. But " Go ! " rang in his ears. It was the voice alike of Chéri-Bibi and duty.

Chéri-Bibi again said under his breath : " Go and lay him out ! "

The poor fellow went. . .

The company present saw him draw near and gathered that some amount of amusement was impending, all the more so as " the major " was not there to enforce the discipline which, as a rule, lay heavily on his irregular army.

The nearer the Dodger came to them the paler he grew. At last he reached the group, and started to utter a polite protest.

" Monsieur Miche," he said ingenuously in a shaking voice, " You forget that madamoiselle is with me."

" No, I don't forget it," returned M. Miche, " I shall return her to you presently."

M. Miche's retort achieved a brilliant success and the laugh was with him, but the event which followed straightway raised M. Hilaire to the pinnacle of a hero. Monsieur Hilaire gave Monsieur Miche a box on the ears !

Next, he had the good fortune to fall into a dead faint which saved him from being overcome by a storm of fisticuffs, in a hurricane fight, in which " the major," who then came in, took part in order to prevent his men, from absolutely finishing off his new recruit.

The astonishing thing was that Chéri-Bibi disappeared during the uproar and Mlle. Zoé herself did not seem in any way perturbed by it. Taking upon herself the duties of a nurse, she poured a jugful of cold water over the poor Dodger's head with the object of bringing him back to consciousness.

M. Miche was the first to perceive Chéri-Bibi's absence. " Hallo, the coalman has cleared out ! " he exclaimed as he gathered up the fragments of the broken glass, the price of which had increased ten-fold since the war.

" Yes, he doesn't like fighting," explained Zoé.

" Then he's not like this gentleman," observed M. Miche, turning to the Dodger who just as the deserved compliment was being paid to him, opened his eyes again. But he smiled none the less gloomily at Mlle. Zoé who was lavishing words of com-

fort on him, which, however, he did not hear for two short, sharp knocks sounded near him—under the trap-door behind the bar which led to the cellar.

Those two knocks possessed a terrifying significance for the Dodger, because they said : " I managed to get in here and now I must get out ! "

At the thought of what was about to follow he gave way to despair and fell into another dead faint.

" All the same he's not going to croak before paying for the damage ! "

" Don't worry about that," came suddenly from a loud voice. " I'll pay for everything in the place."

And under the raised trap-door the terrible face of Chéri-Bibi appeared.

The thought that this new confederate, who was a stranger to the gang a little while before, had been able to remain half an hour or more in the cellar caused M. Miche to see red. But Chéri-Bibi rushed out with an armful of bottles which served as so many missiles.

" Who want's to have a drink ? "

" The major " who now took the side of the public-house keeper, received all to himself a bottle containing bitters, and the effect was startling. He was laid low in his favourite appetiser, while Chéri-Bibi picked up and tucked under his arm the poor lifeless Dodger

and beat a furious retreat towards the pantry guided by the diabolical smiles of Zoé!

An hour later the Dodger came to himself in a spot which was unknown to him. After examining himself and making sure that he still possessed the use of his limbs, he crept out of the hole. Not a soul was about. He was in a dockyard abandoned since the war. M. Hilaire was getting sick of strange holes.

He slipped out between two planks, which was comparatively easy for him to do, and took a short cut through the deserted streets to the Rue Saint Roch. It was a beautiful, clear, cool night and there was a full moon. M. Hilaire imagined that he could see Virginie's face smiling at him from out the vault of heaven.

At length he reached the Rue Saint Roch. Here was the dark, narrow street in which the rays of the moon never penetrated, but in which the light of hope was shining from Virginie's window.

Here was the shop front which hid behind it so much mourning. With a trembling hand M. Hilaire knocked upon it three times. As he waited he suffered moments of unutterable anguish.

The shop-front was lifted. M. Hilaire stood with outstretched hands. Virginie appeared.

She broke into a terrible cry.

"You!" she exclaimed. "You alive!"

"Yes, Virginie, I am alive."

"This is coming it too strong. To think that you should humbug people like this. You good-for-nothing, get out!"

And straightway M. Hilaire, who in the partial gloom was unable to see very clearly was, so to speak, enlightened, and saw stars. A heavy fist struck him violently on the right eyebrow, and made him swing to the middle of the street, and take to his heels, shouting aloud a thousand imprecations, while behind him his wife's voice accompanied his flight with resounding observations which disturbed the peace of the empty and silent street.

It was conclusive proof that Madame Hilaire loved her husband only when he was dead.

CHAPTER XVII

TO BE OR NOT TO BE

Count de Gorbio had returned to Nice in order to put an end to Didier's suffering by conferring upon him the supreme favour of his friendship!

Since it had been given to Didier, if not to measure at least to conceive almost with certainty, the extent of the Count's sinister rascality, this appalling thing—the Count's friendship—seemed to rise up as the worst calamity that had befallen him.

It offered up a terrible perspective did the Count's friendship, and it robbed him of any desire to live the last hours of happiness which love could still bestow on him.

Confronted by the mute despair of the husband whom in her bitter jealousy she had falsely accused, Françoise, after her first fit of dejection, held out her arms to him more to implore than to grant pardon.

"You are right. You are better than I am. Forgive me if I have had a miserable look on my face during the last few days."

How could he repulse those beautiful

arms? Yet in those terrible moments of her love, nothing could efface that number, 3216, which was always present like the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast.

Was it written in the book of fate that that number should never leave him?

One day when he fled from the Villa Thalassa like a thief, in order to forget it, and mounted the stairs leading to Gisèle's rooms, Death itself, which opened the door to him, wore that number on its lips.

Yes, Death had spoken and Gisèle knew the truth.

Madame Anthony had died in the night. Madame Martens and Violette together with Françoise, who joined them when, after Didier's departure, she received the news, vainly tried to console Gisèle who took refuge in a sullen silence. She did not bemoan her loss, or shed a tear, but grimly shut herself up in her grief.

When Didier spoke of taking the almost fainting girl to the Villa Thalassa, she sprang from her chair as though she were demented.

"No, no, leave me. You are all of you too kind to me. Leave me alone. . . entirely alone."

Fortunately this time she broke into a fit of hysterical sobbing. With a gesture Didier motioned the women to leave the room. He remained alone with her. He fathomed the mystery which was already obsessing her. He did his best to comfort her while a new

pain, more cruel perhaps, than any of those which he had yet felt found a place in and wrung his heart.

"She whom I loved as my mother was not my mother," sobbed Gisèle. "I am unworthy of the least kindness from you. Do you know whose daughter I am? I am the daughter of a convict, monsieur."

In the face of Captain d'Haumont's silence the poor thing rung her hands.

"It's awful. I would rather die. I wish I were dead."

"But who told you such a thing? Why, it's impossible." Didier at last stammered, trembling with horror.

"I learnt it last night from the dead woman's papers. Look, here they are. Read them. I am the daughter of Raoul de Saint Dalmas, a thief and a murderer. Now you understand why I wish I were dead. Why didn't I die instead of her?"

Didier gave way to his emotion. That his own daughter should reproach him for his crimes was more than he could bear.

"You are crying, too. You see yourself that it's awful."

"My child, don't distress yourself like this," he stammered in supplicating tones, "I remember the case. Many people maintained that your father"—he had the strength to say it—"was innocent."

Then she rose to her feet her whole attitude expressing revolt.

"I know nothing about it. I only know one thing which is that I am the daughter of a convict."

The unhappy man leant for support against the wall, and his face was distorted with pain.

He continued to implore her with a gurgle in his throat:

"Gisèle your trouble makes you dearer in my eyes than ever. You are not responsible for the sins of your father. You must not suffer for them. I will not let you suffer for them. You must swear to me that you will keep your secret."

She allowed him to take her to the room in which the dead woman lay. The three women were kneeling in prayer by her bedside. And in a whisper so that no one else might hear, she swore as she met his eyes, to keep her secret for his sake.

Then he hastened from the room. But he did not go far. A boy whom he had never seen before was on the look out for him downstairs, and slipping a letter into his hand, walked away without a word.

It was addressed to Captain d'Haumont. He opened it and read:

"My Dear d'Haumont,

"I want to see you at my hotel at five o'clock this afternoon. Don't fail to come. Very serious interests are at stake.

"Yours sincerely,

"Stanislas de Gorbio."

It was just as well. Let them have done

with it. Let everything come to light. Let the deep waters from which it was impossible for him to escape close in upon him and engulf him for ever. . .

In the smartest hotel in Nice it was the hour of afternoon tea. Groups of society ladies and cocottes, and an orchestra constituted a gay company. Didier hurriedly crossed the hall. Someone called him in a friendly voice—quite friendly. It was de Gorbio's voice affable, but loud enough to be heard on every hand.

" Here you are my dear fellow. Allow me to introduce you. . ."

He was sure of himself, of his power, of his irresistible power and he emphasised the position before them all.

He held out his hand which Didier could not ignore and then took a seat at his table. It was a startling incident. " And what a thing to do ! O, grand, my dear."

Ladies, women of the world, actresses, and Nina Noha were there. Charity during the war, like gambling before the war, brought together every class of society. Didier was placed next to Nina Noha, who smiled at him and asked a few trivial questions, which he answered in monosyllables. The whole thing was outrageous, but he had come there to know what was before him and he would see it through to the bitter end.

A quarter of an hour later, in the Count's

flat, he "saw it through." And this time the thing was quickly made plain.

"You are absolutely in my power. The service that I am expecting of you is nothing out of the way and will cause you no trouble. You must obtain for me, through M. de la Boulays, precise details bearing upon certain decisions of the highest importance which were come to some fortnight ago by a French Government department. I shall have an opportunity of telling you which department within the next couple of days. Do you follow me?"

Did he follow him! Nevertheless he remained silent as though he did not understand. The de Gorbio handed him a paper:

"I want a letter signed by you worded as in this copy, and brought to me to-morrow before noon, and then I shall have proof that we are in agreement. The letter reads: 'My Dear Count,

'I am entirely at your disposal for anything that you may require me to do.'

"It's very clear. It's simplicity itself."

Didier crumpled up the paper, mastering his impotent rage.

"Suppose I give you away at once?" he exclaimed. "Suppose I denounce you as a traitor? Suppose I ruin you in ruining myself?"

"No one would believe you. You haven't a single proof against me. I am a partner in several business transactions with M. de la

Boulays. It would be obvious to everyone that you were actuated by sheer jealousy. People would remember that you have already done your best to kill me. Moreover, no one would hesitate to believe the Count de Gorbio in preference to that of an escaped convict."

"Leave him to me, Count," suddenly came from a feminine voice behind them. "You will see that Captain d'Haumont will sign the letter."

It was Nina Noha.

"Ah, I had a feeling that you, too, were in this," cried Didier.

The Count was gone. Didier was alone once more with Nina Noha.

"Don't look at me like that, it's I who saved you. But for me the Count would have betrayed you long ago. But here, acting with us, you have nothing to be afraid of. Remember that we are asking you very little in exchange for the most absolute security. No one but de Gorbio and myself knows your secret. If you wish it we will keep it, if only for the sake of your wife."

Didier stood up without answering her.

He reached the street. For two hours he wandered about without knowing where his footsteps were leading him. He found himself seated in a café in a dingy hole in the town. How had he got there? He could not have said. How many times had he halted in his long agony? He would never

know. "Absolute security. . . if only for the sake of your wife!"

And now he was standing beside his wife who uttered a cry when she caught sight of his convulsed face:

"Didier! Didier!"

His mind was made up. Captain d'Haumont was an honest man.

"Don't call me Didier. That is not my name, and you have married an outlaw."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MIRACLE

NEITHER the father, who in a tragic moment kills his son in order to save him from torture —such as happened in China at the time of the Boxer rebellion and the Siege of the Legations, and may be seen even now in plays—nor the husband who kills his wife, at her entreaty, to save her from the hands of the barbarian—such as happened not long ago in Europe—neither the one nor the other could be in a condition of more appalling distress in his innermost soul than Didier when he said to Françoise :

" You married an outlaw. . . No. 3216 . . . an escaped convict."

Didier loved Françoise, not only as a wife, but as though she were a child, and his heart was kindled alike by his fondness for her, and by a sacred tenderness. Thus he imagined that he could not have struck her a more deadly blow even with a knife than he did when he spoke that terrible sentence.

Nevertheless the miracle happened. While he was speaking, instead of the outburst of

sorrow and despair, which he expected to see, Françoise started with joy and a look almost of rapture was depicted on her face.

He spoke out. She knew then why he went to Nina Noha's villa. It was to cast about for proof of his innocence. But she needed no proof to believe in him.

The miracle was not yet ended.

She kissed him with delight. She told him that she knew about his past life. And he fell upon his knees before her.

She had known and yet she held her peace. She still loved him!

He was silent now for she was speaking, and it was her turn to say vital things.

What manner of divinity was this for whom his story had no terrors, but who had been waiting with an impatience which daily became more painful to hear his confession, for though he might believe himself accursed, she in her heart of hearts had not ceased to love him in spite of his past?

"No one can come between our love," she cried as she threw her arms round him. "No one in this world since our love can triumph even in death. Denounce the scoundrels who are trying to blackmail you. Then let the police come and fetch you. Dead or alive they shall carry us off together, my love."

When morning came Françoise watched Didier as he slept. It was, perhaps, the respite before the last sleep.

What peace and happiness lingered on those features over which so many storms had swept! The sleep betokened the complete exhaustion of a being who had lived through decisive moments and cared but little for the morrow after the events of the day before.

"Wake up, my love," she said. "It is getting late."

Half asleep, he was quite at a loss. Oh yes, he remembered now. He was a free man until noon. The clock struck ten.

"You are right," he said. "Before two hours are over I must inform against them."

"Or sign the letter," said Françoise with the greatest composure.

"What do you mean, 'sign the letter'?"

"I have been thinking things over," she returned.

"What have you been thinking over? You alarm me."

"I have been thinking of what de Gorbio said. He is right. The fact that you have no proof against him means that no one will believe you. They will come here to look for you and send you back to prison. They will find our dead bodies, of course, but de Gorbio will continue his treachery towards everyone. . . everyone. He will still be able to betray France. That's what I've been thinking."

" The whole thing is terrible, of course. I can't deny that I am a convict, and haven't a single proof against that 'honest man.' "

" We said 'let us both die' " went on Françoise, " and we thought that in saying so we had said the last word. We are like children in love who think only of themselves, and that's quite wrong, isn't it ? "

" What would you have me do ? "

" Well, I want you to sign the letter," answered Françoise, without hesitation. " Sign what he wants you to sign. Then he won't mistrust you, and sooner or later he will himself supply you with the proof of his villainy."

" It certainly sounds very attractive, but it's dangerous. Meantime, if he has my signature in his possession I should be taken for his accomplice."

" Not at all, because at the same time we will write to my father," said Françoise, going to the writing desk and reading out a letter which she had written : ' Didier and I are now certain that Count de Gorbio is a scoundrel. We shall have proof of his treachery in a few days, and in the meantime you should be on your guard against anything that he might propose to you.' "

" You are always right. . . Oh, the heart of a woman ! . . . What splendid intuition. Yes, I will do what you suggest.

I will let myself be guided by you like a child. You are the best and surest and most courageous of counsellors. I will sign the letter whatever might happen to me."

"To us, my Didier, to us. What we must do, first and foremost, is to defeat the scoundrel."

It was in a heightened mood that Didier went to meet de Gorbio.

Nina was with the Count. They were waiting for him. The Count displayed some impatience, which she strove to calm.

"Take it from me that he'll come," she said.

But it was after eleven o'clock, and de Gorbio was hardly able to remain still.

"Perhaps I was wrong to show my hand so openly to him," he said. "He is capable of doing some mad act and ruining us all."

"Look!" she exclaimed suddenly, lifting the window curtain slightly. "There he is."

It was indeed d'Haumont. He was coming along somewhat hurriedly with a resolute tread.

"See, he's afraid of being late."

He was at once shown in, and bowing coldly to the Count and Nina, said simply:

"I've come to sign the letter."

Thereupon he took a pen and signed it.

" I told you, Count, that Captain d'Haumont could refuse me nothing."

"Well," said de Gorbio, " you see that things will happen, and here we are the best possible friends."

Didier again bowed coldly:

" I am at your orders."

" I've none to give you to-day, but don't forget our last conversation, and act accordingly. I will send you my instructions very soon."

Didier took leave of them. He had reason to be satisfied with himself. The Count's last words seemed to indicate that his dangerous self-sacrifice and daring artifice would reap their reward: " I will send you my instructions very soon." A few lines written by de Gorbio and then Didier and Françoise could face death.

As he entered the villa grounds Françoise came running up to him.

" In the midst of this terrible tragedy," she said, " a trifling worry has occurred."

" You don't mean that," he returned. " Nothing can worry us in future."

" Yes, my dear. Our hours of happiness are numbered, and I was hoping to spend them with you alone—quite alone."

" Well, we won't be at home to anybody, or we'll retire and find peace and quietness in some forgotten corner of the mountain."

" Madame Martens has brought Gisèle here."

" Where is the dear child ? " he asked.

Françoise pointed to the house. She was unable to say another word. Once again an incomprehensible and unendurable feeling of anguish came over her.

CHAPTER XIX

WOMEN AGAIN

DIDIER'S joy in welcoming Gisèle at the villa at a moment when the swift, cruel course of events made Françoise long eagerly to be alone with him, caused the greatest depression to her ardent and faithful mind.

She did not understand his strange eagerness while he failed to perceive that she did not understand it, for he was obsessed with the idea that it was his duty, as soon as might be, to offer Gisèle in her distress the consolation—problematical and disturbing though it might be—of the truth.

His eyes were for the time being turned away from Françoise, and fixed on Gisèle, and he saw nothing of her ever-increasing sadness.

He had nothing to reproach himself with, for though he was eager to enlighten the poor girl, he desired none the less to impart this last secret to Françoise.

Ought he to attempt to unbosom himself to her before knowing what attitude Gisèle would assume towards her convict father? Obviously not. The secret, strictly speaking,

belonged to Gisèle. He was not entitled to tell his wife that Gisèle was the daughter of a man who had sentenced himself to death, if it were Gisèle's wish that the world should remain in ignorance of so terrible a fact.

Gisèle did not believe in Raoul de Saint Dalmas's innocence. It seemed to her that all Captain d'Haumont's kind words were intended but to pour balm on wounds which nothing, she thought, could staunch.

Thus the task which d'Haumont had to undertake at the Villa Thalassa was a considerable one, and he set to work with an earnestness which may be imagined.

He did not make up his mind until after he had taken a few solitary walks which Françoise watched, though with a feeling of shame ; but they led to no certainty in her mind that a calamity which she tried to believe impossible had befallen her.

She reproached herself for her lack of faith. She told herself that she must be crazy. Didier made free with Gisèle, and Françoise suffered the pangs of jealousy, but, after all, she had never seen him go beyond the limit of a protector, whose age entitled him to be slightly affectionate towards an unhappy child.

It was at this juncture that Madame d'Erlande called at the villa. She was waiting for Françoise in the drawing-room which looked out on to the garden when Didier and Gisèle went past. She declared that she was " petrified."

Her mind harked back to the morning when she saw Captain d'Haumont waiting about the pavement for the young "adventuress." And now she had managed to get herself admitted to the villa! Captain d'Haumont had had the effrontery to establish her there. "Really some people will shrink from nothing."

Just then Françoise came in and the conversation did not flag for long. After a few commonplaces Madame d'Erlande mentioned that she had just caught sight of Captain d'Haumont with the young girl from Violette's.

"Have you adopted her?" she inquired.

"Not exactly, but she has just lost her mother. She is not very well herself, and as my husband has for some time taken an interest in the family. . ."

Françoise stopped short, unable to say more. The word "interest" sounded monstrous, and it seemed to her that Madame d'Erlande was watching her with a look of pity.

In the silence which followed she suffered a thousand tortures. She flushed and paled in turn. It was as though she herself was the culprit.

At last the visitor rose in her most imposing manner, and before taking leave said casually:

"That young girl is very good looking."

Then she cleverly managed to slip out a

few remarks on " the danger of introducing young girls into a household."

Françoise allowed her to go for she felt as if she were stifling.

It was obvious that Madame d'Erlande knew something. Her affectation of reserve was worse than any open accusation. She looked upon Françoise with pity. Everybody was sorry for her. It was too awful. And suddenly a sentence which the Solicitor-General had used in his speech for the prosecution at the trial, burnt into her brain like letters of fire :

" Women are the cause of all the calamities which have befallen young Raoul de Saint Dalmas."

The Solicitor-General was right and she, poor thing, like so many others had been duped by him. Didier retained the same faults as marked Raoul's life. He continued to love Nina Noha, and he was making love to Gisèle in his own house.

She reached this point in her reflections and even went beyond it. His reason for confessing the past to her was because he knew that de Gorbio, his rival with the dancer, was about to tell her everything.

In this grievous fashion Françoise's thoughts ran on until they reached the deep void on the brink of which she for a moment hung suspended. . . She remembered the time not so long ago when her heart gave way to the same feeling of despair, and yet a few

days afterwards she opened her arms to Didier, innocent! What had come to pass since then? Madame d'Erlande had paid her another visit; and then, alas, Gisèle had taken up her abode with them, and then there were Didier and Gisèle's walks together. Oh, if she only knew; if she were only certain! . . When she was not accusing Didier she was doubting him.

Where was he at that moment? What was he doing? He was still with *her*. . . Where?

She looked for them; she looked while herself keeping out of sight. And suddenly she discovered them in the shadow of a clump of mimosas in which more than once Didier had kissed her, and now he was kissing Gisèle, clasping her in his arms with a great and tender emotion.

CHAPTER XX

THE "TULLIA"

THE "Tullia" lay alongside the wharf in the old harbour. She was a curious vessel was the "Tullia," a combination of schooner and collier. What kind of cargo did she carry? A little of everything it would seem if any importance could be attached to some remarks which were overheard from the crew, who did not gossip or waste much time on the wharves.

Where did she come from? No one knew exactly. She had lain moored alongside for some weeks.

Nevertheless, an unusual commotion prevailed on board on this particular day.

The crew who were all of a more or less hang-dog appearance, were going hurriedly to and fro with goods from the town as happens when a ship is about to set sail.

The captain, whose somewhat phlegmatic features were flushed with alcohol, alone seemed to look on the bright side of life, and take things easily. He did not hurry himself more than was his wont, but sauntered

slowly on the wharf or bridge or poop with his hands in his pockets, smoking a cigar.

Close to the vessel, seated on the wharf, was a fisherman who gazed dully round, and whose copper-coloured features are not unknown to us.

One evening, while Yoyo, after his return to Nice, was following the Count de Gorbio, whom he had received instructions to keep under observation day and night, he was surprised to see him turn his footsteps through the deserted streets of the old town to the harbour and accost on the wharf a man wearing a sailor's oilskin, the hood of which was pulled down.

When the m n parted, Yoyo left the Count and followed the stranger. The man climbed the gangway of a vessel under the light of a lantern.

As he went past the lantern the man's face became visible and Yoyo uttered a stifled exclamation, "The Parisian!"

The Parisian! The Parisian was alive! That very evening he despatched a telegram to Paris, and at daybreak next morning a man was seated on the wharf a couple of paces from the vessel, fishing.

* * * * * *

That day, the day on which there was so much movement on the "Tullia," a motor boat put off from the vessel and set out to sea.

But after making straight for the skyline she returned slowly and went along the coast,

being propelled with the steering oar, as far as the entrance to the roadstead at Villefranche. The boat then went close to the terrace at Thalassa, and a few feet from the grotto, which was the scene of the disaster that nearly proved fatal to the Parisian and put an end to the Burglar's and the Joker's double lives.

Since then the Parisian had visited the spot, and more than once made his way from it into the villa gardens.

The Parisian's sentiments for Gisèle had but increased since he imagined that Didier was about to become, if he had not already become, his rival. And his joy in the plot which he concocted against the young girl, some time before, doubled the fierce pleasure which he felt in anticipation, as he thought of the fine trick that he was about to play on him.

The event was close at hand, and it did not need any great perception that afternoon to gather from the doings and behaviour and impatience of the Parisian who secretly landed a few feet from the Villa Thalassa gardens, that something like an abduction was on foot.

The Parisian was in the gardens at the time when Françoise, in a state of mental suffering, was watching her husband and Gisèle. He was ahead of her and in a better position to spy upon them than she was.

He was so well situated that he could not

only see, but hear them. He caught just a few odds and ends of a long conversation.

"Yes, Gisèle, I swear that your father is innocent."

Her father! A nice revelation!

Didier's arms were outstretched and she flung herself into them.

"Yes, I am your father. I am that convict. Men did not believe in my innocence, but you, Gisèle, will believe in it."

She believed in it now!

The Parisian from the distance watched father and daughter return to the villa in silence. They had nothing more to say to each other. Didier's task was accomplished, and both were filled with a great happiness.

He felt within him a deep peace. It was as though he were overwhelmed by it. He was in sight of the goal. Two hearts believed in him. What cared he about the rest? The rest meant everything that might happen to him—death perhaps. At least dishonour and the penal settlement. And yet he lifted his eyes with thankfulness to heaven, and when he was alone in his study, wept for joy.

Gisèle went to her room, which was on the ground floor, the window of which looking on to the garden was open. She, too, wept, but it was because of the sufferings of the man whom she loved as a father before the secret, which she had half divined the day before, was revealed to her. She fell into

a seat and was conjuring up visions of his terrible life in the convict settlement, and the agony to a man like Captain d'Haumont of practising constant deceit, when, suddenly, something passed before her eyes—something fell at her feet. It was a letter.

She picked it up, disturbed and alarmed by this new and mysterious thing, and she read :

" Unless you wish Raoul de Saint Dalmas, your father, to be denounced to the police, meet me at once on the quay in the docks at Nice. You will be told what you must do to save him. If you value his life, keep your visit a secret and burn this note."

Pale with terror, Gisèle ran to the window, whence the amazing message came. She could not see a soul. She read the letter again. She placed her hands before her eyes, feeling that her reason would give way. But that was not the moment for weakness. The slightest aberration on her part and Captain d'Haumont, her benefactor, her father, would be doomed.

She no longer hesitated, but threw a cloak over her. She failed to notice, in the rapidity of her movements, that the hideous letter which she had crushed in her hand had slipped to the ground.

As she left the room she encountered a servant girl who drew back at the sight of her face.

" Tell monsieur in half an hour's time that

I had to go to Nice and shall probably be late back," she said as she passed her.

And she made her escape.

The servant struck by the strangeness of the message, determined after a slight hesitation, to go and apprise her master.

She met him as he was leaving the study and told him what had happened. Taking alarm, and scarcely comprehending what the servant said, d'Haumont rushed up to his daughter's bedroom, and the first thing that met his eyes was the crumpled letter.

He seized and read it. He knew that handwriting well. It was the Parisian's! It was the Parisian's peculiar handwriting—the man whom he accounted dead. He concentrated himself on the letter which a breath of wind might have blown away, and read:

"Unless you wish Raoul de Saint-Dalmas, your father, to be denounced to the police, meet me at once on the quay in the docks at Nice. You will be told what you must do to save him. If you value his life, keep your visit a secret and burn this note."

Where did the letter come from? Didier in his turn darted to the window. He could not see anyone, but he observed certain traces which had escaped Gisèle's distracted gaze—leaves and branches pressed down and trampled upon.

"Get the car out," he ordered in a hoarse voice, and he rushed up the path to the

garden gate which Gisèle must have taken. She was some distance ahead by this time, but he thought that he would catch up to her even if she had been able to take the tram to Pont St. Jean Station.

The car came up and he flung himself into it. He hurriedly scribbled a few words on a card and told the servant to take it at once to Madame d'Haumont.

The car tore along the road. Suddenly Didier very distinctly caught sight of Gisèle's form in the distance. She had just stopped a taxi which was coming back from Nice disengaged and stepped into it.

He gave a sigh of relief. In less than a minute he would overtake her.

At that juncture the car after making a sudden lurch at a turning, veered round and there was the sound of an explosion. A tyre had burst causing a breakdown, while the taxi passed out of sight at a smart pace.

* * * * * *

Yoyo continued to play the part of an angler. He saw the Parisian's motor boat return.

The Parisian was soon on board ship. A quick consultation took place on the bridge between him and the captain as a result of which the order for the vessel's departure seemed to have been countermanded.

The gangway was replaced, and the captain in his usual phlegmatic manner, with his hands in his pockets, gnawing a cigar, de-

scended to the wharf while the Parisian mounted the poop and joined the mate, requesting him to put a stop to the shouting with which he directed the final stowing of the vessel's cargo.

What did it all mean ? Yoyo was asking himself the question when a taxi entered the harbour by the eastern gradient, and pulled up at the wharf.

A young girl jumped out at once and found herself face to face with Captain Amorgos, for such was his name.

Yoyo did not know her. He had never had occasion to meet her. And yet he would have given a great deal to overhear what passed between the sailor and the handsome child.

She appeared to be in a state of great anxiety, and agitation. The captain treated her with marked politeness. He held his gold-laced cap in his hand and was smiling at her.

She went along with him at last with a firm tread and both boarded the vessel.

The gangway was at once drawn up, the hawsers let go, and the " Tullia " moved away from the quay, making for the fairway.

Yoyo could no longer see either the girl or the captain or the Parisian. Only the figure of the mate on the poop stood out in the beautiful crimson light of early evening.

The vessel had cast off slowly without any dramatic movement, and Yoyo was on the

point of leaving the wharf to report to Chéri-Bibi the sailing of the Parisian in the "Tullia," when a man sped swiftly down the eastern gradient and collided with him. They recognised each other.

"Captain d'Haumont!"

"Yoyo!"

"Have you been here long? Have you seen a girl get out of a taxi?"

In a few brief phrases Didier was told what he wanted to know. Yoyo pointed to the "Tullia," which was entering the fairway.

Didier rushed off at a mad speed. What did he expect to do? Yoyo hurried after him. Thus Didier reached the rocks which jut out and form a headland opposite La Réserve which the "Tullia" would have to pass—the "Tullia" in which his daughter lay at the mercy of the most villainous of his persecutors.

Didier dived into the sea.

CHAPTER XXI

TRAGIC AVOWALS

A SERVANT knocked at the door of the room in which Françoise had shut herself up determined in her distress to have done with life and its miseries. The girl delivered the card upon which Didier had hastily scribbled a few words. Françoise, leaning her burning forehead against the window-pane, had just seen Gisèle leave the house, followed a few minutes later by Didier: "Go after her," she murmured bitterly.

"Saynthine is not dead," she read, "and is still pursuing Gisèle. Don't worry if I am not back this evening until late."

"Two of them are after her just as two are after Nina Noha," she said to herself aloud in tones of deep disgust.

She tore up the card and let the pieces drop to the ground. She would have liked, in this way, to tear out her heart. But since it was much more difficult than to fire a revolver at her breast, she stood up and turned towards the small desk in which she

knew she would find the weapon that would put an end to all her woes.

As she passed before a glass she caught sight of her reflection and shrank back in alarm.

"Heavens, I look like my own ghost!" she cried.

At that moment the door was opened, and a woman came in quickly.

"What's happening, Françoise?"

It was Madame Martens. The maid had confided her anxiety to her and she entered the room in defiance of orders.

"Oh, my poor child, you look as pale as death."

"That's what I was saying to myself," answered Françoise with a wan smile, "and I wish to heaven I were dead."

"You terrify me. Calm yourself, my dear. What's the matter? Tell me, I implore you. Only a day or two ago you were saying how happy you were."

"Yes. . . well, it's all over. It didn't last long did it?"

"Where's your husband? I must speak to him."

"My husband is with Gisèle."

The words were spoken in an accent at once so simple and fierce that Madame Martens learnt all that she wanted to know there and then.

She grasped the situation, and clasped Françoise in her arms, while the latter

yielded without seeming to be conscious of it.

"Have you taken leave of your senses? What do you believe now?"

"It's not what I believe, but what I saw," she answered, with a face like stone.

"What did you see?"

"I saw them kissing like no other couple."

"That's not true."

"Really, my dear," returned Françoise, with an unearthly smile, "you have a great deal of confidence in Captain d'Haumont's honour. Well, you must know that he who told us what it pleased him to tell us about Nina Noha is Gisèle's lover into the bargain."

"Unhappy woman! . . . She is his daughter."

The statue seemed to acquire new life from the revelation, and the blood flowed once more to her temples while a new light shone in her dimmed eyes.

"His daughter!" echoed Françoise. "How did you know that she is his daughter?"

"I've known it for the last fifteen years."

"Fifteen years! You've known for fifteen years that Gisèle was the daughter of . . ."

"Raoul de Saint-Dalmas! Yes, my dear Françoise, I've known that. Why, believe me, I recognised your husband at once. Our family were friends of the Saint Dalmas."

Françoise gazed, wild-eyed, upon Madame Martens.

"Oh," she whispered, "you know . . . you know that he . . ."

"I know that you were wonderful and, like you, I know that he is innocent. Oh, Françoise, you saw him kiss Gisèle—his own daughter!"

Françoise was now trembling with excitement, and her teeth chattered.

"Why didn't he tell me so? Why did he tell you a thing like that?"

Madame Martens took the poor girl's icy hands in hers and held them against her loyal and compassionate heart.

"Oh, believe me, he made up his mind to tell you everything as soon as Gisèle knew the secret of her birth. The reason why you saw them clasped in each other's arms was because he had told her, and she knows the truth. Don't doubt your husband. He is the best and most unfortunate of men, and if a sin was committed, he was not the most to blame."

"Do you know Gisèle's mother?"

"No; that remains Raoul's secret. She is supposed to be a married woman. I say that she is to blame because she did nothing for the child, while the first thing that Raoul did when he came back from the penal settlement was to search for her, to rescue her from poverty, and to put her under proper protection. Don't be surprised if I plead his cause so warmly. I have known him for a very long time. He was young

in those days ; he did many foolish things ; but he has a good heart, and in our family—I speak of my father and mother whom he used to visit—we never doubted him—never for a moment. So you will understand my agitation the other day when you introduced him to me and I recognised him. . . . Your husband ! Since then he has confided to me your entire story. He knows that he can speak to me as his most faithful friend. He knows how fond I am of you, my dear Françoise. If you only heard with what an accent of truth he came to me and said : 'She knows everything, and yet she still loves me. Her love is the one thing in the world that matters, and it has saved me. The convict settlement may claim me again ; death may strike me down ; but I shall thank heaven, for I have been the happiest of men because of her—because of my Françoise' ; and as he spoke, he sobbed aloud. Oh, let me cry, too."

Françoise was already in tears. . . .

It was Françoise who was the first to recover her self-possession.

"But in that case," she said, "this story of the pursuit is true. And where is Didier ? What danger is he incurring now ? "

It was Madame Martens' turn to be at a loss. Françoise told her of the hurried departure of Gisèle, followed by that of Didier. From all appearance something

unforeseen and, possibly, greatly to be feared, had happened.

"He is not back yet."

She wanted to leave the house and endeavour to find him.

Madame Martens pointed out that she had nothing to go upon, no clue to follow up. She led her to hope that he might come back at any moment. Moreover, she persuaded her, more easily than she dared to expect, to remain at the villa in order to wait Didier's return.

Then, seeing that she was now calmer, Madame Martens took her departure.

As soon as she was gone, Françoise threw a wrap over her shoulders, went down the terrace to the sea, and made her way over the rocks to a certain fisherman's hut.

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE HOLD

DIDIER was a powerful swimmer. It was child's play for him to reach, in a few strokes, unseen by anyone on board, the ship's boat which was being towed at the "Tullia's" stern.

The gathering dusk seemed to lend itself to his daring project. Hoisting himself to the netting by the rope with which the boat was made fast, he seized the right moment to creep on to the quarter-deck.

The crew were then at their stations, and he found no difficulty in hiding behind some bales of goods which lumbered up the deck.

From his position he could see and hear what was going on.

Where was Gisèle? What had they done with her?

The chances were that the poor thing was a prisoner in the main deck house, which was obviously the only spot with any pretence to cleanliness on board, for it was used as a sleeping place, and wardroom by

the officers. The officers of the "Tullia!" Didier caught sight of several men as they passed, and they seemed to revive the memory of the faces which had haunted his nightmares for ten years.

As he had not yet seen the Parisian, he felt fairly certain that the ruffian was with Gisèle. To come closer to her, to let her know as soon as he could of his presence on board, and to try to save her that very night if circumstances were propitious, was not an absolutely impossible plan—thanks to the boat which the "Tullia" had in tow.

The vessel was making an easterly course, but hugging the coast. Didier hoped that the Parisian would relieve the poor girl of his hateful presence for a while at dinner time. Then he would rescue her, for the boat was ready at hand to receive them.

Beyond all else, he must act with the greatest caution. A single false move, and both of them might be lost. He assumed, of course, that the watch on her would be relaxed when they were at sea. The pirates would then have nothing to fear; and possibly Didier would soon see the prisoner and her ruffianly captor come on deck.

However, time passed, and there was no sign of Gisèle.

Then Didier's mind was filled with such gloomy thoughts that his inactivity became

more than he could bear. That awful brute the Parisian was capable of the worst crime.

Didier regretted that he had not accepted Yoyo's offer to come with him and take part in the venture. It seemed better to send him to Chéri-Bibi in order that the latter might be informed of the drama which was being enacted on the ship.

Didier could contain himself no longer. He left his hiding-place, and taking advantage of the watch being at that moment in the forecastle, he crawled along the deck until he was alongside the main hatchway, which was open.

As the result of an unexpected change of tactics, he barely had time to reach the hatchway and slip down the ladder when, at the word of command, and the sound of whistles, men rushed up and the mate appeared. The manœuvre broke the calmness of the night, for the "Tullia" altered her course, stood out to sea, and was now dancing in the trough of the waves.

Didier went down a few more steps for fear of being seen.

Suddenly something occurred above him which at first he did not understand. Men closed the hatch by slipping the cover over it. He was shut up in the hold, without apparently the crew suspecting in the least that he was there. Startled, he made no attempt to stop them, hoping, none the

less, that presently, when the deck was free, the hatch-cover would give way to the vigorous effort that he would make upon it.

A convict has to perform such miracles of physical strength at the penal settlement, that, after leaving it, he can scarcely believe that anything will resist him, particularly when his power is increased tenfold by feelings such as those which seethed in Didier's mind.

A few moments of helplessness and stupefaction ensued.

He stood midway on the ladder in the deep obscurity. Would he climb up into the darkness, or would he descend to the blank regions below? Or would he search and cast about for some outlet?

The swinging of the vessel had become accentuated, but her rolling ceased. She was now sailing before the wind.

He mounted the ladder and his head came in contact with the hatch. He fingered and groped over it. He braced his shoulders under it.

A shadowy figure in the black unknown of the hold, he put forth his wonderful strength without effect; and the perspiration poured off his muscles worsted in the fight.

Suddenly a gleam of light stole like a silver blade between the chinks of two boards and produced a little life in the opacity. He stretched out his hand to the

light and caught it in his palm as if it were a pale and ice-cold wave. But it slipped away from his grasp and vanished. . . . A tarpaulin must have been thrown over the hatch above.

As he could not mount the deck, he went below.

He went below and listened. He heard the sound of a murmur and voices. He caught the growling of a man's voice and a sob. It was his daughter. His daughter was crying.

Then he boldly attacked the darkness and fought with it. He struggled with mysterious packages which encumbered his path. With what energy and caution he combated the obscurity! How he pushed and carried and flung aside and rolled the goods away. . . .

It was a tremendous piece of work to shift a cargo like that!

But his daughter was weeping not far away. . . .

He came to a stand; he could not now hear a sound. Her grief had acted as a guide to him, and he was sorry that she was no longer weeping.

Then, on chance, he fought his way through the dark hold again, and a particularly heavy bale yielded in the gloom and the weight was such that it seemed as if his arm must break. . . . Then a faint ray of light appeared, a tiny blood-coloured light,

and simultaneously a man's voice sounded in his ear—a voice that he knew full well: "Hallo, where did that knife go to?"

* * * * * *

Gisèle went on board the "Tullia" feeling convinced that she personally had nothing to fear.

She reflected when she was in the taxi that the manœuvre by which this unknown person threatened her, and at the same time Captain d'Haumont, was first and foremost an attempt at blackmail.

It was blackmail to which he would have to submit, and she was chosen as a go-between because she was so little to be feared. They would, of course, have to come to some understanding. Some definite sum would be fixed, and they would bring pressure on her so that she might induce Captain d'Haumont to give way.

Therefore she readily and unhesitatingly accompanied the captain on board the ship. At his request she entered the deck-house.

This part of the ship—the deck-house—was of unexpected smartness—well cared for, beeswaxed and polished like the captain's cabin on a private yacht.

Here a man stood whose face she hardly saw in the semi-darkness.

The captain himself lit the lamp which hung above the table. Two small alcoves were used as divans by day and sleeping berths by night.

Gisèle uttered a cry, for she recognised de Saynthine.

With an impulsive movement she tried to draw back and reach the deck.

But the Parisian forcibly detained her and drove her further into the deck-house, while the captain, who had doubtless seen worse things than that, himself closed the little door and went on deck whistling an ancient and doleful Moorish tune.

"You must forgive my rough methods," began de Saynthine, bowing with a flourish, "but I feel so much pleasure when I am with you, that the thought of losing you by some silly understanding, impelled me to adopt a course which is unlike me, for, as a rule, I treat ladies with kindness."

Gisèle made no answer, but gazed at him with ever-increasing dismay.

"Don't be so scared," he went on. "I don't want to do you any harm. On the contrary, I've only come to life again because I wish to do you a bit of good."

She still remained silent, whereupon he whispered:

"So, my dear, you too thought that I was dead. How you must have mourned me!"

As she said nothing, de Saynthine began once more to make excuses.

"What can that scamp of a father of yours have been telling you? Did he say that we were in prison together? Did he

tell you what good friends we were, the pair of us ? "

This time Gisèle spoke, or, rather, gave a gurgle imploring him to be quiet.

" Unless you want to drive me out of my mind, hold your tongue."

She was unable to say another word. Her sobs choked her utterance.

" That's the first time that I've made a woman cry," grinned the Parisian. " You see, my dear girl, how sorry I am. If you had any common sense, you wouldn't take on like this about your noble father. He is far from deserving the interest which you appear to take in him. And, worse still, he's a chap whom one has to guard against."

As Gisèle looked up amid her tears with a glance of bitter hostility, he explained himself.

" For instance, I, who am speaking and looking at you, and who admire and love you. . . . Well, if it had depended upon him, I shouldn't at this moment be able to speak or admire or love you. Oh, the scheme was well concocted, I can assure you ; and he might well believe that he had conveniently sent me to kingdom come with a few of my friends. Why should the death of three or four old prison pals matter to the murderer of Reynaud the banker ? Please, mademoiselle, don't faint. The conversation isn't over yet, and then, let me

tell you, I bear no grudge against your father. Far from it. I admire him; and the proof of it is that I want to enter his family. You will see that everything will come out all right. Mlle. Gisèle, Monsieur de Saynthine has the honour of asking you for your hand in marriage."

Gisèle now knew the mode of blackmail which de Saynthine had chosen and what he wanted from her.

Great as her excitement and horror were, despite the awful terror into which those terrible words about her father had thrown her, and the abyssmal depths in which she was struggling—at that moment when she was completely at the mercy of her inquisitor, and had every reason to fear the worst, her poor, pitiful, awakened feminine intuition enabled her to perceive a possibility of salvation or at least a hope of deferring the catastrophe and suspending the blows of fate.

It was not merely money that the scoundrel wanted, as she at first believed, when she did not know who he was; it was not only herself that he wanted as she assumed when he appeared as the originator of the snare —he wanted the daughter *and* the money.

His last words left no room for doubt. He was not waxing sarcastic when he asked her to marry him. He spoke in tones of the greatest seriousness; and she realised what the success of a project like that meant to

him; the safeguard which marriage to Captain d'Haumont's daughter—even an unrecognised daughter—would represent to de Saynthine.

Gisèle once more covered her face with her hands. Thus the Parisian thought that the time had come to plead for himself, and he sat down beside her. He wanted to take her little hands in his, those little hands which persisted in covering her face, the sight of which had always been so agreeable to him.

"Come, I say, does the mere look of me frighten you?" he said.

"No," she had the strength to answer in a faint, exhausted voice, which, however, had already lost something of its former hostility and resentment. "It's your way of acting that frightens me."

"Well, to gratify you I'll change it—at once. Look here, in future I'll be the humblest and most devoted of your slaves. All of us on board the 'Tullia' will be your slaves, mademoiselle. To begin with, I will act as steward if you like. You must be hungry. No? . . . I assure you that you must eat something. You'll soon see how nice everything will turn now. We'll have a little bit of dinner together."

Gisèle did not decline the offer.

However artful and strong and clever a man may be, a woman's look—simply the manner which she assumes when she speaks

or remains silent is more than a match for him. The ladies' man is "dished" beforehand by an ingenious child, or even by a foolish one.

For example, the Parisian in that cabin which had been transformed into a private room, imagined that the charm of his manners was having its effect. Here was another girl who would not remain adamant for long. . . . Thus he became politely assiduous. He told her amusing stories. He tried to make himself out to be a wit. He paid her every attention. He put himself out for the least thing. Gisèle, he thought, was won!

And now suddenly, he once more escaped from a great danger when he perceived in a small mirror a movement made by Gisèle, who, while his back was turned, picked up a knife from the table and concealed it.

Shaking with a rage which he could scarcely contain, he went up to her, and the poor thing beheld a face with a frightful smile upon it bending over her, while he asked, with his eyes fixed on hers:

"Hallo, where did that knife go to?"

The Parisian had no need even to make a gesture to obtain the poor little knife, for Gisèle threw it on the table, stammering:

"It was not meant for you."

"Really. Whom did you intend it for?"

"Myself."

The Parisian burst into an ominous laugh.

"Thinking of suicide! You'll get over that."

Gisèle sobbed aloud. Her luckless action had made him an intolerable tyrant again.

"There," he said, "you've cried quite enough. Please dry your tears. I don't want anyone to see you with red eyes. What will they take me for?"

He stood up and told Gisèle in peremptory tones to come with him.

"We'll have a little turn on deck. A breath of fresh air will do you good. It will be a diversion. You were more sensible just now. You must become sensible again, my dear."

He told her to lead the way, and she could not choose but obey. Thus she went up on deck to the splendid night. She was but a poor wretched cypher in his hands, and felt that she was lost—entirely at the mercy of the monster's caprice.

She bitterly regretted the loss of the knife with which she intended to kill herself; while the Parisian, who placed her arm in his, assumed once more an idyllic tone and composed pretty speeches to her under the stars!

Obviously M. de Saynthine was playing to the gallery. He knew that he was being spied upon. Captain Amorgos and the youthful Nicopoli, the mate—the latter a regular viper in venom and malevolence—were not far away, watching, without appearing to

do so, the least gesture in this lovers' walk on the deck under the perfect moonlight.

It was not unwelcome to the Parisian to teach those gentlemen that he knew how to win, in a few hours and without undue fuss, the good graces of the charming young girl who, when she saw him first, betrayed such deadly terror of him.

Before the eyes which watched him at work—possibly from the cabin on the poop or from behind the foremast—he assumed the manner which lovers never fail to affect when they wish to demonstrate to the world around them, that the lady who is with them is theirs.

They mince and smirk and spread themselves over the beloved object, paying those delicate but slightly familiar attentions which are permitted only to the elect.

How Gisèle longed to cry aloud to the stars! But the stars were too far distant; and they would never have heard her. And, to make matters worse, there was not a sail on the sea, not a ray of human light, not a hope on the horizon. Lord, what was to become of her!

Was she to descend again into that loathsome prison?

Alas, the moment had now come. M. de Saynthine considered that the farce had lasted long enough. He led Gisèle's faltering footsteps to the ladder which led to the deck-house.

Suddenly she came to a stand. The Parisian at once realised that the prospect of being shut up again with him would drive her to commit some desperate deed. She was about to call for help, like the little innocent she was. And he would be made to look ridiculous. It was not difficult to foresee from that set face and those trembling limbs that she was prepared to resist him to the uttermost.

That being so, he put forth all his powers as an actor. He told her that she could go below to rest without fear. He was not a brute, he said. He knew how to wait. He would know how to make her love him—and other bunkum. Was she not going to be his wife? She might rest in peace. Bowing to her, he gracefully retired.

She eyed him in a state of stupor as he left her, and then began to descend the ladder, as if she were drawn below by some power stronger than herself and more powerful than her own will. . . .

Captain Amorgos and his mate Nicopoli were certainly very much amused, and they did not hide the pleasure which the little diversion of a few moments before had caused them. They took good care to acquaint M. de Saynthine, " who was really such a ladies' man," of the fact.

They plied their glasses freely, and their minds became excited, their imaginations

aflame, their self-conceit ruffled. M de Saynthine was on the rack and lost his patience. He could not doubt that his friends were making game of him.

And thereupon he stood up and struck the table a tremendous blow with his fist, like the ill-bred man that he was. The youthful Nicopoli in particular had got upon his nerves.

" I do as I please, when I please, and where I please," declared de Saynthine.

" You do still more what she pleases. You are no cleverer than other men. She leads you by the nose, and the proof of that is that you are here telling us a pack of stories while she's snapping her fingers at you in her cabin."

The Parisian began to swear, which is never any argument. In his violent temper, he sent several empty bottles spinning and went on deck.

They knew where he was going. He had uttered the words : " This night if it suits me." And it seemed as if that night did suit him, for he pushed aside the sailor on guard outside the deck-house, and with the clatter of a drunken man, went down the ladder which led to Gisèle's cabin.

A dull red gleam from a lamp threw a grim light over the little room.

A dark form lay in one of the alcoves. The brute leant towards the form. There was no longer any pretence of caution or

playing a farce. There was a woman and her master.

If there was a row the more would be the pity, for it couldn't be helped. She would know that his patience was exhausted.

CHAPTER XXIII

CHÉRI-BIBI AGAIN RISES TO THE OCCASION

FRANÇOISE turned her steps towards the hut occupied by Sylvio the fisherman.

Ever since her first extraordinary and terrible encounter with Chéri-Bibi, her mind continued to dwell upon him though she was unable to understand the mentality of the amazing being who constituted himself the guardian of her happiness at her very door.

That a man like Didier, though he had lived in the penal settlement, could become the friend of such a creature, born to commit crime, condemned to commit crime, was something which defied every attempt at explanation. And yet . . . and yet Françoise had heard such words of compassion and grief emerge from those distorted lips when he spoke of the innocent Didier—for he was innocent—that she felt instinctively that it was to this monster that she must go if she needed help.

She had come away from the lion's den shuddering, but often in difficult moments

her troubled mind was comforted, because she knew that not far from the terrace gardens he was keeping watch.

And just as after that first tragic night she came over the rocks to him to seek for the key of the riddle, so now she knocked once more at the door of his hut. This time he was not alone.

It seemed, indeed, as if he were holding a reception, and the gloom was so strangely thronged, that Françoise drew back but Chéri-Bibi had already come forward to meet her.

With the gesture of a Spanish grandee he invited his visitor to enter his humble abode.

"Welcome to the poor fisherman's hut, madame. At a time like this when the malice and wickedness of some people pass all bounds, it is a refreshing sight to see faithful friends."

Yoyo was the first to be introduced to her.

The appearance of the poor fellow at that moment was less prepossessing than that of any of the others. He was still out of breath from the race which he had run in order to bring Chéri-Bibi the latest news, and, moreover, he still had with him an angler's paraphernalia which he had acquired from some sportsman on the quay in the old harbour at Nice.

"This is the famous Dr. Ross of Chicago,"

began Chéri-Bibi, "the most renowned surgeon-dentist in the azure city, a great favourite among the ladies, and an intimate friend of the celebrated Nina Noha."

Françoise gave a start when she heard the name, and wondered why the bandit, who knew everything, should mention it in her presence. She failed to understand his object, nor could she guess why the persons present should be introduced to her.

The oddness of the scene, the disturbing spectacle of those faces only half-glimpsed in the dusk, the singularly excited tones in which the fisherman spoke—all these things alarmed her and yet she had confidence. She felt that whatever that enigmatic and terrible being's words and deeds might be, there was a tie—her love for Didier and his mad friendship for him—that specifically linked the woman of the world and the convict together.

"This is Monsieur Hilaire, a respectable grocer in the Saint Roch district in Paris, lately chauffeur at Nice to M. de Saynthine, another friend of Nina Noha and the Count de Gorbio."

Françoise, whose breath came unevenly, fell back a step before the somewhat exaggerated bow which the Dodger made with his long body, for with shy and precipitate politeness he bent almost in two before her.

"I feel very honoured to make your acquaintance," he said.

"As to this young girl," ended Sylvio, "she is Mlle. Zoé, and belongs to a respectable family of gipsies. She became a street singer after her mistress, Mlle. Nina Noha, deprived herself of her services as lady's maid one evening for listening behind the door."

Now Françoise grasped the situation. All these persons constituted Chéri-Bibi's eyes and ears round about Nina Noha and de Gorbio; in other words, round about the danger with which Didier was menaced.

Zoé had scarcely finished making her curtsey when Chéri-Bibi growled:

"And now you others have a look outside to see how the wind lies."

The company vanished like a flock of scared sparrows.

Françoise and Chéri-Bibi were alone. In a painfully mournful tone, which was hardly calculated to fill her with renewed hope, he broke out before she could open her mouth:

"I know what brings you here. Make your mind easy. We will save him again even now."

Madame d'Haumont dropped on to a stool; she was almost fainting. From Sylvio's look and the manner in which he spoke she felt that a fresh calamity was threatening her Didier.

Sylvio was seized with pity for her weakness. He, too, was deeply stirred, and the very bluntness of his reception of her and his

exaggerated language were, in part, intended to conceal his agitation. Yet he did not entirely succeed and his gruff voice shook as he said :

" Madame, you are one of the best of women and heaven has sent you into the world to make you suffer as only the best of women or wretches like myself do suffer. There is no need for subterfuge, petty methods, useless words or hypocrisy between us. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth ! You have already proved to me that you know how to bear it. It is for you to show your courage, and we will find a way out of this miserable business. Your husband has fallen into a snare. He was made to believe that the young girl whom you received at your house was running the gravest danger. So he went on board a ship which immediately set sail, and is under the orders of one of his worst enemies, a M. de Saynthine, of whom you may have already heard."

And Chéri-Bibi finished in a savage voice in which flamed out his wrath against the feigned innocence of a girl capable of the worst sort of intrigue :

" The young girl in question was acting in league with de Saynthine."

Françoise uttered a cry.

" That's not true. I thought so too, but I have just learnt that she is Didier's daughter."

" Whose daughter ? " bellowed Chéri-Bibi

"Why his daughter. Do you understand. . . . his own daughter."

"Oh!"

It was Chéri-Bibi's turn to give way. He lurched against the wall of the hut and the wall seemed to swim round him.

The reader has often had the opportunity of appreciating the distinction and polish of the carefully chosen words in which Chéri-Bibi loved to express himself in the presence of ladies. But on this occasion his astonishment was so overwhelming that he completely forgot the language of those society circles whose manners he had adopted long ago with an enthusiasm worthy of a better fate, and which he knew how to recall on special occasions.

Not for a moment did he doubt the truth of Françoise's revelation. It was the explanation of too many things which had caused him pain for him not to accept the statement with every demonstration of satisfaction. It acquitted her Didier! It put him back in his place in Chéri-Bibi's heart.

But he, the wretched friend who had doubted her Didier—how greatly he was to blame! Recently he happened to catch sight of Didier and Gisèle in one of their walks, and it sufficed to make him look upon Didier's conduct as scandalous. Not long before, too, he had witnessed Françoise's jealousy and grief. And he mourned for her, and left her execrating Didier.

Chéri-Bibi recalled the memory of it and beat his disloyal breast as though it were a drum. His clenched fist banged and bruised his flesh with resounding blows. He was terrible to see and no less terrible to hear:

"Moucher! . . . Blunderer! . . . . Thief! Booby and pickpocket! . . . Good for nothing knifer! You deserve to be guillotined for making such a silly ass of yourself. To the devil with such a fathead and idiot! To think that my heart foresaw nothing. I'll knock you about until you've lost the taste of beating. . ."

Françoise thought he was about to kill himself on the spot with his fist.

She gave a hoarse cry of fright and dared not stir a limb. Those shouts of fierce friendship which no longer had anything human in them, filled her with as much fear as the greatest manifestations of enmity would have done.

Her eyes were closed and her teeth chattering when Chéri-Bibi came to himself, saw her, and began to think about her.

"You and I, madame, have been greatly at fault," he said. "Didier did not deserve such treatment at our hands. But we've wasted enough time in jeremiads. You must go back to your house and we will set to work again."

"What are you going to do?"

"It would take me too long to tell you.

Let it suffice for you to know that we shall bring him back to you."

"I intend to go with you."

"Oh!" he said, and stared at her for some time. "You don't even know where we're going."

"You will tell me."

"We're off to San Remo, the port at which the ship which carried your husband away is bound to call. You see how simple the thing is. You needn't worry yourself."

"I shall go with you to San Remo."

"Oh!"

He looked at her once more.

"Well," he said, "I'll take you if you promise to keep quiet when we get there."

"What do you mean?"

"You mustn't interfere with our plans."

"I shall help you."

"In what way?"

"I don't know, but I won't leave you."

Chéri-Bibi went down on one knee and kissed the hem of Françoise's robe. Then he stood up, opened the door and beckoned.

The three others came in; and in a quiet voice he gave them his instructions for the journey. Dr. Ross was to obtain passports to enable them to cross the frontier. Hilaire had to see to the motor car, for Chéri-Bibi declined to make use of Françoise's car. Zoé would attend to sundry important purchases for them.

After their departure from the hut Chéri-Bibi said :

" You will now understand why I introduced those people to you, dear madame. We are going through a difficult time, and Captain and Madame d'Haumont must know on whom they can rely when they find themselves in a fix. You will see these people at work. They are a very decent lot."

" Are they also my husband's friends ? " inquired Françoise in a pensive voice.

" No, madame, they are my personal friends, but at a nod from me they are ready to face death for your husband. That they are not already dead is no fault of theirs ! "

" But in that case who are you that they should be so devoted to you and you so devoted to them ? "

" I am crime itself, madame."

CHAPTER XXIV

AN ENTERTAINMENT ON BOARD SHIP

THE Parisian, as we have seen, descended to the deck-house under the influence of drink, the jeers of his friends, and his worst instincts.

As he stooped over the dark form which seemed to lay asleep though the clatter that he made ought to have put him on his guard, the figure suddenly lifted itself, a face arose before his face, and eyes met his eyes. . . He turned pale, sobered by the apparition. It was not Gisèle who confronted him, but Didier!

Didier sprang at him. He tried to stifle a hoarse cry and paralyse the movements of the man who leapt at him. But there was a great tumult; so much so indeed that Amorgos and Nicopoli on deck looked at each other with a smile.

"M. de Saynthine certainly finds it no easy matter to make himself understood."

"His voice is a little thick," explained Nicopoli.

The uproar became so great that the sailor on guard shouted for the assistance of the two officers.

" If we don't interfere there'll be nothing left for us to do but to pick up the pieces," said Amorgos.

They went below and interfered.

A terrific struggle ensued in the cabin, and soon Didier, half killed, choking for breath, and reduced to helplessness, was bound hand and foot, as only sailors know how, and thrown upon one of the bunks. And before long they discovered Gisèle hiding in the hold behind the planks through which Didier had crawled into the cabin. They dragged her out with scant courtesy more dead than alive, and she was treated like her father. A well-armed man mounted guard over the human packages.

The Parisian was hoisted on deck much the worse for the encounter for he had a serious wound in the head; but one thing alone perturbed him: How did Didier get on board?

" Captain, it will be wiser not to put in at San Remo," he said while his wound was being dressed.

* * * * * *

It is well known that pirates, fillibusters and smugglers, who are brothers in arms in daring have little of the angel about them. Doubtless, because they live a life which is perpetually menaced, and may be ruthlessly cut off in the height of its success, they have retained throughout the centuries their tastes for feasts and entertainments and loose living.

If their instincts as beasts of prey found scope for development during the war in which all was fish that came to their net, they did not deny themselves their diversions. And the thing that is most appreciated by a gang of pirates who are comfortably gorged with eating and drinking is, it is certain, the sight after dinner of a beautiful prisoner in tears whom they shamelessly strip and bind on the deck for punishment in the orthodox way.

What followed on the "Tullia" on that particular night was therefore in the nature of the expected and even the inevitable. The adventurers who formed the crew had nothing to learn from their forefathers in the brutality of their tastes or the inhumanity of their diversions.

Gisèle was bound to the foremast. Didier was bound to the mainmast. The Parisian gave the order and a sailor came forward, armed with a rope's end and Gisèle's torment began. . But it was Didier's cries which drowned the poor thing's wails and rent the night.

She let her head droop a little on one side like a wounded bird.

The infamous Parisian could not help admiring so much beauty in distress, and obviously he revelled in it, for in order to prolong the pleasure of a spectacle which enabled him to take his revenge alike on the father and daughter, he determined to leave

Gisèle for some time longer thus shamefully exposed to the gaze of his friends.

Then he interrupted her punishment and returned to Nicopoli.

"Let's get up a bit of strength," he said, as he refilled his glass.

The fact that Didier would suffer torment waiting for what would come next, added immensely to the enjoyment which the miscreant promised himself.

They contined to drink; and the clumsy sailors danced in couples to the music of a guitar twanged dolefully by the ship's cook. This dirty greasy-looking old man appeared to have lost all relish of many things, and to take but little interest in the dancing which he accompanied on his instrument with a tune that he had played for years.

Didier repeatedly gave a start which showed that he was making supreme efforts to rid himself of the rope which bound him, but on each occasion his attempt brought down on him the jeers of the onlookers, who examined his bonds anew, and took additional precautions.

The Parisian suddenly made up his mind to finish the business; and he picked up the rope's end which lay on the deck and walked towards Gisèle.

Didier stopped him on the way with a hoarse cry in which for the first time he besought mercy.

"A fortune, a fortune if you will leave the child alone."

"You've already sung that song," he answered. "It's no go. Besides, if I must have your fortune, I shall have it. But I intend to take your daughter's skin first."

And, raising his arm, he began to strike.

A cry, piercing, mournful, sorrow-stricken, went up to the heavens and rent the air, and the great quivering sea seemed to make answer to the call of a tortured soul by another and louder clamour.

Taking alarm from the unwonted commotion, the sailors put a stop to their disgraceful performance, and the Parisian's arm did not descend a second time. Moreover, at that very moment, several shots rang out.

A sailor near the Parisian came tumbling to the deck mortally wounded, and dark forms which seemed to descend from the heavens in order to rescue Gisèle from her awful torment, leapt on to the deck.

Didier uttered a shout of joy and triumph.

"Chéri-Bibi! . . . Chéri-Bibi!"

"Here I am, old man. Don't be afraid; they won't get you to-day."

He came, in fact, to the rescue like a giant sent by God—or was it the devil?—and he soon committed great slaughter near him.

He picked up a bar of iron and whirled it round breaking limbs and smashing heads

as if they were so many nutshells. Françoise, whom Didier failed to recognise, was standing near him, keeping watch over him, and, like King John's son at the battle of Poitiers, shouting :

" Look to your right . . . Look to your left."

An attack was made upon him from the rear, and she fired her revolver on the man who was threatening him. When the Dodger became convinced that nothing could be done to avoid blows, he displayed the spirit of former days, and set himself to bestow them with a fury which was all the greater since he was not there for his own pleasure.

Zoé, even the youthful Zoé, picked up a hatchet and fought with all her might.

As to Yoyo, he was the first to mount the deck, or, rather, to climb up to it with the agility of a monkey.

As soon as he was on deck, Yoyo rushed to the rigging, reached the masting, crept along the yards, and showered down upon the enemy " plums " which certainly did not emanate from the Rue Saint Roch, for there was no gunsmith's shop in that street.

And yet the party consisted of but five persons, of whom two were women.

After the first moment of amazement and alarm, the crew pulled themselves together. They saw for themselves how few their opponents were.

Amorgos was mortally wounded and in his death throes, while Nicopoli yelled to his men, and endeavoured to put some amount of system into the fight.

He collected together some ten men who had managed to arm themselves, and were not very severely wounded, and, placing himself at their head, he rushed at Chéri-Bibi, whom he considered the only enemy to be feared.

A decisive struggle ensued.

Ten men, though they were maddened with drink, had no terrors for the convict. Nevertheless, on seeing Françoise in danger, he was obliged to retreat in order to go to her assistance, and he at once found himself in a critical situation.

Two men managed to seize her, and were dragging her away when Chéri-Bibi, in his anxiety for her, turned his back on his enemies and darted towards her.

It was a disastrous movement, and Nicopoli's men took advantage of it to force him to the ship's boat which had been hoisted on deck, and the convict was no longer free to wield his club with which he was so formidable.

The crew uttered shouts of triumph, for Chéri-Bibi seemed to be cornered. Suddenly the nearest of his adversaries fell to the deck, and at that moment Françoise was rescued.

It seemed as if the ship's boat was sud-

denly possessed of a devil. And it was indeed a sort of demon who appeared from it like a jack-in-the-box, in order to crush his own forces which he must have needed in hell! Yoyo looked like a real devil with his swarthy skin and blazing eyes, and his queer locks of hair standing erect on his head like the horns of a goat. . . .

The Parisian during the successive phases of the struggle was not wasting his time. He knew Chéri-Bibi; he knew the number of the crew, but they were more than half drunk. He looked upon the result of the fight as extremely doubtful, and as he had small love for running risks, he at once made up his mind to leave the ship, taking his prisoners with him.

His plan was immensely facilitated by the fact that the motor boat in which his enemies reached the "Tullia" was now ready to Nicopoli's hand.

This boat was the one which the Parisian utilised when he wished to land at the Villa Thalassa, and he had returned to the old harbour in her. She did not form part of the "Tullia's" equipment, and when the vessel set sail Yoyo noticed that the motor boat lay moored to the quay. Didier had plunged into the sea with such haste that it did not occur to Yoyo, until afterwards, that she could be used by them. It was, however, in this boat, which he boarded a few minutes later, that he set sail at full

speed to acquaint Chéri-Bibi with the course of events.

Yoyo overheard the sailors talking among themselves, and learnt that they were to put in at San Remo, and the question arose whether they should go to San Remo or fall upon the "Tullia." Luckily, Chéri-Bibi decided to attack the vessel there and then. His determination was due less to his cunning than to his impulsive nature, which led him to make straight for the danger which was threatening Didier. The enterprise was favoured by the merry-making on board.

No notice was taken of the motor boat which came alongside the "Tullia" without any attempt at concealment. The shrieks of pain which Françoise and Chéri-Bibi heard led them to thrust aside every precaution, so much so, indeed, that they all rushed on board in the wake of Yoyo, and thus the motor boat was left to become the prize of anyone who cared to take possession of her.

As soon as Nicopoli told the Parisian that she was at his command, the latter knew what he had to do.

Didier and Gisèle were gagged and lowered like packages into the boat by the tender mercies of Nicopoli, who slipped away from the fighting, and approved of the Parisian's decision, a decision which might eventually be turned to his own account.

It did undoubtedly serve his purpose, because the Parisian omitted to tell him

that he had fired the ship, believing that it was a good opportunity to reduce Chéri-Bibi and his friends to ashes.

When the last remaining combatants saw the fire, the motor boat was already some fathoms away.

It was at this moment that Didier clearly perceived in the light cast by the vessel, which was burning like a torch, Françoise's features as she bent over the netting and watched the boat which had brought her on board make off without her.

From the moment that she boarded the "Tullia," her every effort to join Didier was thrust back. She no longer saw him on the deck at the place where he cut such a sorry figure, and she wondered what had become of him.

Didier managed to loosen his gag and utter a great shout, "Françoise!" to which she made answer with a despairing cry, "Didier!"

Chéri-Bibi heard, saw, and grasped the situation. Only one hope remained to him —the ship's boat. As luck would have it, the crew were now pretty well disabled. The last of them, retreating from the fire, made a futile rush at the boat; but Chéri-Bibi and his party remained masters, quickly lowered her, and were able to put off without having suffered much damage on the battle-field; for such the deck of the "Tullia" had become.

A few shots were fired upon them, and then the men hurled themselves into the sea to avoid being burnt alive.

They shouted desperately for help, lifting their voices in entreaty to the boat as they were about to sink beneath the waves. But Chéri-Bibi had other things to think of than to give heed to the death throes of a few pirates.

Following the track of the motor boat, Françoise and Chéri-Bibi saw the Parisian and his prisoners fade away into the distance with a swiftness that left them no hope.

A few terrified shouts, a few piercing cries for assistance could still be heard on the illumined sea.

Françoise, on her feet in the boat, wrung her hands. Chéri-Bibi made her sit down, and in his gruff voice gave the order :

" To San Remo ! "

Nothing, indeed, was to be done but to pull for the coast with the least possible delay, and to start in pursuit of those who would arrive before them and find some secret hiding-place.

CHAPTER XXV

THE END OF A SOCIETY CAREER

Nina Noha had returned to Paris to fulfil a dancing engagement at the Salle Favart.

It was the night of the dress rehearsal. Her dressing-room was already decked with flowers. Nothing was wanting but de Gorbio's bouquet, and the presence of the Count himself.

Something must have prevented him from coming. He left the previous evening to pay a visit to the de la Boulays' country house, and the business must have been important, for he stayed the night.

Suddenly a knock came at the door, which was opened before anyone had time to answer it. It was de Gorbio. He was very pale, and Nina saw that something serious had occurred. She sent her dressers away.

"Well, Count, what have you been doing with yourself?"

"I believe that I'm being shadowed."

She leapt to her feet from the sofa.

"What! You are being shadowed, and you come here and tell me so," she answered

in a muffled voice in which there was a note of menace and anger.

"I found it out only just now, but I may have been mistaken."

"Ah, I see, now you've lost your nerve. . . . That's another thing. Tell me what happened to you so that I can ease your mind?"

"It's not loss of nerve. . . . I don't like the look of it."

"That's better still! You are not your old self," she rapped out with slight contempt.

De Gorbio had sat down and he wiped his icy-cold forehead.

"I'm afraid that I've let myself be tricked by de la Boulays."

"How do you mean? Out with it, quick."

She gazed at him with a look in which there was no trace of friendship. If the Count had blundered she would never forgive him. Strange to say, her admiration for him had dwindled since his engagement to Mlle. de la Boulays was broken off, which showed that in her eyes business came before love. The luckless duel added still further to her disappointment in him, for it wounded him in body and in self-esteem, and she considered that "he was getting played out."

De Gorbio quickly told her what had happened the day before between him and M. de la Boulays in regard to an official report.

"The report was most interesting. I spent the night in studying it and taking extracts

from it. I fear that I was seen on the job."

"What could be more straightforward? The matter was introduced to you, and it was your duty to take notes."

"Listen to me, please. I fear. . . ."

"I can see now that the least thing frightens you."

"Yes, the least thing. I fear that the report was a sham one, and that he laid a trap for me."

"What sort of trap? Assuming that your surmise is correct, you thought that the report was seriously meant, and you took notes of it in good faith. What can they blame you for?"

"Well, my dear girl, they may blame me for sending off the notes which should have been kept secret."

"To whom did you send them?"

"To F. 24 and C. 12."

"Well, no one will be any the wiser, I hope," she said, in a grumbling voice.

"I hope so, too, but I am not sure of it."

"Since when?"

"Since my arrival here, for as I turned round I noticed two suspicious looking persons standing on the pavement outside the artists' entrance."

"Is that all?"

"It reeks of the police, my dear girl."

"In my opinion you are, luckily for you, looking at the black side of things. Please be good enough to assume your usual smile,

and go and join your friends in the theatre. In any case, as you are under the influence of such strange obsessions, don't come back here to-night. It would make it difficult for me when I go on the stage."

The Count rose to his feet. The dancer's language had by no means reassured him. He grew increasingly perturbed.

"Oh, one last word, my dear Count. If by chance anything should happen to you, take steps to prevent me from being inconvenienced, if you don't mind."

"Would you desert me, Nina?"

"I should think I would desert you! Why, I shouldn't remember ever having known you. And it would be to your interest to forget me, too."

"My interest!"

"Yes. Don't forget the Reynaud affair. I still have your letters and the pearl. You will realise what a calamity it would be if any search were made at my place."

De Gorbio grasped the meaning of her words. He left her a prey to the gloomiest forebodings.

Nina made her appearance at the end of the first act. She secured a triumph. The audience stood up and cheered her. She caught sight of the Count in a box. He had recovered his self-possession, and, in any case, he was putting a good face on things. She was grateful to him for it. If he were within an ace of being arrested, it

showed that he was not devoid of a certain degree of pluck.

Nevertheless, when her many admirers flocked round her in her dressing-room in the interval, she did not hesitate to lay stress upon the Count's absence. Her friends expressed their astonishment.

"Yes, there's been a coldness between us for some time," she said.

Suddenly an admirer whom she had previously taken into her confidence rushed into her dressing-room.

"They've just arrested the Count de Gorbio."

The excitement was indescribable. Nina alone maintained her composure.

"Why have they arrested him?" she asked, as she proceeded with her make-up. "True, for some time he appeared to be very worried, but, as usual, he did not confide in me. For that matter, we've been nothing but friends for some considerable time."

CHAPTER XXVI

"FIR TREE INN"

Old Césaire was in the act of taking down the shutters of his inn when the throb of a motor on the sea made him look around, and almost at once he caught sight of a motor boat rounding the headland which sheltered the "Fir Tree Inn" from indiscreet observation. The boat was making for the somewhat primitive landing-stage at a smart pace.

At the same time the sound of a whistle acquainted him definitely with the nature of the visit that was being paid to him, for, dropping his shutter, he hurried to the water's edge.

"How are you, Césaire?" shouted the Parisian. "Any strangers in your hole?"

"Not a soul, monsieur. Our pals at the farm left last night. I shan't see them again till to-morrow night. The house is at your disposal. I see you are bringing home the spoil. 'Pon my word, fresh fish, too! . . . How are you, Monsieur Nicopoli? How's the captain?"

" I hope he's all right. We'll have a chat later. Lend us a hand with the ' catch.' "

Didier was landed first. He did not attempt to make the slightest resistance against the four fully armed men who, he felt, were prepared to blow his brains out at the least movement.

If he had not already been shot, he could put down such patience and generosity to the satisfaction which the Parisian felt in prolonging his agony. The father and daughter had fallen into nice hands !

Every faculty of Didier's mind was directed to one goal—Gisèle's safety. Thus he listened and watched without appearing to do so, for at that moment he pretended to be in a state of absolute dejection and prostration, in order to deceive his gaolers and his tormentor.

When they hauled him out of the boat he did not even turn his head in Gisèle's direction which seemed to offer convincing proof of his mental and physical suffering.

They took him down into the cellar, threw him into a sort of cell which was not even lit by an air-hole, tightened his bonds, and fastened him up by the leg to a chain fixed in the wall.

" Now, you won't play the fool, and no harm can come to you," said the Parisian. " I promised de Gorbio to keep an eye on you. If you behave yourself, I'll come and see you now and then with your daughter

when we are married. By the way, you can order what food you want. Old Césaire will refuse you nothing. I'll pay the bill."

So saying he closed the heavy door on his prisoner and carefully drew the bolts.

Gisèle, who gave no sign of life other than an occasional murmur which slipped from her bloodless lips, was carried rather than led into a room, if indeed it was possible to dignify with this name any of the apartments in the " Fir Tree Inn."

" Now, let's have something to eat, ordered the Parisian. " I'm frightfully hungry."

They made themselves comfortable on the terrace.

At that hour there was no fear of being disturbed. For that matter, visits to old Césaire were few and far between. He was known for his lack of hospitality to strangers, and sinister rumours were current about his place. He allowed people to gossip. It suited him.

The spot at which the inn stood was a lonely one, far from the main roads, in a sort of creek which was dangerous for shipping.

All the same it was a very pretty place, and in the early morning light the wretched little hovel in its nest of greenery, surrounded by a chain of purple rocks overlooking the azure sea, roused no unfavourable suspicions.

The Parisian, Césaire and Nicopoli breakfasted cheerfully as became good fellows who are easy in their minds and may congratulate themselves on the flourishing state of their affairs.

Césaire, indeed, noticed that M. de Saynthine's beauty was somewhat impaired, and that his guest's clothes were the worse for wear, but he took care not to refer to the fact, nor did he show any curiosity in regard to the two captives whom they had entrusted to his keeping.

He did not fail, however, to ask after the Count.

They drank the Count's health.

Whether from fear or gratitude they could not say enough in his praise. Césaire maintained that he was the most influential man in France, and nothing could be refused him, while he could get his friends out of their difficulties however bad the case might be.

"There's a man who pays you well when you work for him."

Moreover, the Count had promised that they should all make their fortunes!

"Yes, that's all very well, but pending the making of our fortunes I'm going to have a sleep."

"I see," grinned Nicopoli.

"In the arms of love," said Césaire, winking in the direction of the room in which the

villains had taken Gisèle. "Shall I go and fetch the mayor for the wedding?"

The Parisian did not pay any heed to them. But when he reached the doorway of the inn he turned round.

"I say, if you hear a row you needn't trouble to come and see what it's all about."

The two others guffawed and he disappeared indoors.

"He's right to let us know," laughed Nicopoli. "The little girl kicked up a dust when he tried to kiss her. I bet we're going to see some fun. You'll hear something presently."

They shouted for the sailor from the "Tullia," who remained in charge of the boat, to join them, and they cracked another bottle together.

Every now and again they sat silent, their eyes fixed on the drawn venetian blinds. And, in fact, they soon caught an unmistakable noise and cries which were followed by silence, and then by a renewal of the disturbance.

"Look here," broke out Nicopoli, "we're not the only ones here to be having a 'round.' I really believe that your furniture is taking a hand in it. Your Louis XVI. dresser is having something."

The sailor hummed an Italian song whose refrain was that love was a beautiful thing.

Just then the postman came up. He

handed Césaire two letters and a newspaper, and did not refuse a drink. He stopped to listen for a moment to the noise from the inn.

"Don't bother about that," said Césaire. "It's a couple who are always quarrelling."

The postman went on his way.

Césaire opened the newspaper and at once uttered an exclamation.

"I say, it can't be true."

"What's up?"

Nicopoli was struck by Césaire's excitement and pallor, and he snatched the paper from him. Set out in large type he read:

"Arrest of Count Stanislas de Gorbio!"

They could not believe their eyes. More than once they read the telegram of ten lines, sent out by the news agency, without grasping its meaning. At length they were obliged to yield to the evidence. The all-powerful Stanislas de Gorbio had been arrested as he was leaving the Salle Favart during the interval. Compromising documents were found on him. The rumour was rife that the Count was at the head of a powerful foreign organisation which had its ramifications throughout the country. Judicial commissions were being sent to the towns in which de Gorbio had lived. At Nice, in particular, an inquiry which was opened in camera gave promise of early results and exposures which would create a sensation.

Césaire and Nicopoli both pulled long faces.

"Well, the game is up," growled Césaire. "Shall we tell de Saynthine?"

At that moment they lifted their eyes to the window with its drawn venetian blinds. What tragedy was being enacted in that room? The sound of a struggle had broken out with renewed violence.

Then suddenly silence fell, a silence which was more startling than the tumult which preceded it.

"Tell de Saynthine!" Nicopoli made answer. "I don't care a hang whether he gets out of the mess or not. If you ask me I shall make a bolt for Italy. Good-bye Césaire."

He was already on his feet. He stopped a moment when he saw a boy coming from the wood waving his arms.

"What does the kid want?" asked Césaire.

The boy came running up to Césaire.

"Dad sent me to warn you that gendarmes are coming through the woods and over the cliff."

"Damn it all, gendarmes! Wait a couple of minutes and I'll join you Nicopoli," squeaked Césaire, rushing into the inn to collect together his little hoard.

When he came out again he began to curse like mad. Nicopoli had not waited for him, and the motor boat was disappearing round

the headland, steering straight for the Italian coast. Then he hurried into the woods with the youngster.

Thus the "Fir Tree Inn" seemed as if it were deserted when the constables appeared.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ROOM WITH THE VENETIAN BLINDS

When the Parisian entered the room in which he and his confederates had imprisoned Gisèle, he found himself in the presence of a scene which might have brought tears to the eyes of the most callous.

The brilliant sunshine pouring through the blinds illumined the simple couch on which lay the most comely, yet mournful, picture of captivity which it is possible to imagine. The torn dress scarcely covered the young form which had already borne so much. The heavy bonds bruised and lacerated the flesh. Her head drooping upon her shoulder, her closed eyes, her white lips showed that life in that frail being had sunk into unconsciousness. The only sign of vitality about her was her hair which was touched lightly by the golden shafts of the early morning sun and was aflame.

But all her weakness and all her suffering, could not move the Parisian, or rather soften his heart, for he was indeed moved in the

sense that his natural brutality of disposition found a diabolical joy in seeing before him a victim of whom nothing could now rob him, and who, to his convict mind, was all the more alluring now that she already bore the marks of his cruelty.

"Gisèle," he called, but she made no answer. The poor thing did not even give a start. He stooped over the motionless body, and made certain that she still lived. All he had to do was to rouse her.

With a hideous chuckle he began to loosen the ropes which bound her, but in his excitement his hand shook, and he was unable to untie the complicated knots quickly enough; so that in his impatience he took from his pocket his jack-knife, and made short work by cutting them.

Gisèle gave a long sigh. Then the Parisian threw down his knife and took her in his arms.

She stared at him with her great eyes gleaming with unspeakable horror as he kissed her.

He forced his kisses on her. The man who had inflicted those wounds expected to cure them by beslavering her with his kisses. The miscreant's arms were the strongest bonds which had yet imprisoned her. She was lost. He had every reason to think so and he gave a triumphant laugh. Then she flew at him.

Mad with rage he momentarily let go his hold and she slipped away.

Great weakness is allied to great strength

if it be galvanised into life by fear or horror, or by the will to die rather than to yield.

A tremendous struggle ensued between those two dissimilar beings; between that graceful child defending herself with the suppleness of a cat which claws and bites, and that brutal monster who by a single movement might wholly destroy her.

The man did not always get the advantage, nor did the cries of pain all come from Gisèle.

The men who sat drinking outside the inn were not alone in hearing the cries and the sound of the struggle. They reached Didier in his cell.

He had not waited for them to begin the work of releasing himself, but he now increased tenfold his efforts. He had at first attempted to bite through one of his bonds, and next he dragged himself to a barrel which stood in a corner, and at last succeeded in wearing away the rope by rubbing it on an iron hoop.

The first bond severed, the others were a matter of patience. But he felt that there was no time for patience. As he heard Gisèle's screams he gave a yell, and endeavoured to break the ropes at one stroke. But more haste less speed. Thus he summoned up his will to proceed systematically as though time was no object.

A few minutes later he was free from every fetter, having loosened the nut of the screw which fastened his foot to the iron chain.

Nothing remained before him but an old door. Only Gisèle was no longer calling for help.

The Parisian, in the room, had ended by overcoming her desperate resistance. Taking advantage of a moment when, out of breath and utterly exhausted, she clung to a chest of drawers, he slipped behind her and seized her in such a way that none of her movements could hurt him. Then he lifted her and was about to throw her almost fainting on the floor when Gisèle, whose hand was clutching the chest of drawers, came into contact with a knife.

It was the knife which he had used to cut the ropes. . . Her fingers closed over it.

"Not while I'm alive," she cried in a final gasp as she plunged it into her breast bespattering the Parisian with her blood.

He let her slip from between his arms and the poor little mortal sank to the floor, stricken to death.

This terrible result was certainly no part of the Parisian's plan. With an exclamation of rage he bent down over the quivering body whose life's blood was ebbing away. He had got the better of the child but even in death she had escaped from him. And for the first time he cursed death, which no longer served him, and now ceased to be his accomplice.

He drew himself up still foaming at the mouth from the struggle, railing against the fate which had robbed him of his prey, and in endeavouring to wipe his bloodstained

hands on the furniture and walls he left red marks in all directions.

Suddenly the door opened and he was face to face with Didier.

"My daughter!" d'Haumont cried as his eyes fell upon what the other had brought about.

After that not another cry was heard. It was a fight to the death between the two men. They rolled on the ground, interlocked, panting, struggling, striking their heads on the slabs, gripping each other by the throat, and using their teeth like wild beasts.

At one time the Parisian gained the upper hand, at another time it was Didier. Nevertheless the latter felt that his strength was waning. He was in the last stage of exhaustion from his marvellous efforts of the last two days and nights.

Was he to go under? He would have liked so much to live in order to kill his enemy and know if his daughter were dead.

No! She was still alive. She opened her eyes. There was a look in her eyes which resembled life, and suddenly indeed her eyes saw and understood.

The Parisian bore down with all his remaining strength upon Didier's chest, digging his knees into his sides, while his murderous fingers gripped the throat of his beaten enemy and pressed. . . pressed hard. A tremendous spasm shook Didier from head to foot as he lay under him. In a few minutes

all would be over. But Gisèle had drawn nearer, creeping up to the knife with which she had stabbed herself and which had fallen at her feet. The two men had grappled with each other so quickly that neither of them was able to secure it. Gisèle could reach it. She came still closer and lifting herself on one elbow, managed to get up on one knee.

She raised her arm. The hand which held the knife did not tremble, and thrice she drove it into the Parisian's back, to the very hilt, and then fell into unconsciousness again.

Dead! dead! Gisèle dead!

Was it true that Gisèle was dead? If you are not dead, Gisèle, open your eyes once more. Take one more look at your father before you leave him for ever. Do not remain insensible to his suffering. Have a last thrill of happiness in his arms.

But no movement and no thrill answered Didier's distracted kisses.

Suddenly the room was filled with people. The inn echoed to numerous shouts. Armed men rushed in. Two gendarmes appeared amid the scene of carnage and death.

The Parisian was still alive. He lifted his head. He had something to say before he died. They supported him. They gave ear to him. He pointed to the Nut:

"That man killed both my mistress and me, out of jealousy. He is an escaped convict. His number is 3216."

He fell back dead. Such were the last words of Arigonde, nicknamed in the penal settlement, the Parisian.

A few minutes later a motor car was held up in the street of a neighbouring village by a crowd in the centre of which two gendarmes were escorting a prisoner who was handcuffed and covered with blood.

"What's this?" asked Françoise, who was in the car with Chéri-Bibi.

"It's an escaped convict who has just committed another murder."

She stood up, recognised Didier, and fell in a dead faint in Chéri-Bibi's arms. He too saw and heard and grasped the situation.

"*Fatalitas!*" he hurled forth to the heavens.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MONSIEUR AND MADAME MARTENS

MONSIEUR MARTENS, the Solicitor-General, who was about that very day to "appear," as they say in the Law Courts, in the d'Haumont case, was an upright magistrate, who judged others as severely as he judged himself; a man of irreproachable character and somewhat narrow mind.

Duty never appeared to him to possess an agreeable side to it. He had never known what pleasure was. There are some men who are born with a sour disposition, yet they do great things, though they fail to make the people round them happy or fall in love with goodness. If such persons suffer in their own household no one has any pity for them.

M. Martens' matrimonial misfortune was entirely unknown, even to himself, but many people, had they been aware of it, would have discovered excuses for his wife. As a matter of fact one person only, perhaps, would have condemned the hapless woman, and that person was Madame Martens herself.

From the day when a moment of weakness had thrown her into the arms of Raoul de Saint-Dalmas, she lived a life of remorse and of constant fear lest she should have to pay the penalty. She knew that if her husband discovered her sin, she could not count on his forgiveness. The rights of the outraged husband, the pride of the offended magistrate, would force him to an open rupture, and the least that she could expect was disgrace for herself and family.

All this will indicate the state of mind in which Madame Martens lived since the " Fir Tree Inn " case arose, and in particular since she learnt that by a sort of fatality in which she beheld the hand of an avenging God, it was her husband who was to make the speech for the prosecution in the provincial Assize Court in which the trial was to be held.

The case created an enormous sensation. The fact that M. de la Boulays' name was involved in a scandal of the sort, Françoise's marriage to a convict, the rumours which were current regarding the connection between the de Gorbio and the d'Haumont cases, the peculiar attitude which Nina Noha adopted in the course of the investigation —all these things combined to stimulate public interest.

Rooms in the hotels were booked three weeks in advance, and there was great competition for tickets of admission to the Court.

In vain Didier declared in the course of the

investigation that Gisèle was his daughter, and that he was trying to rescue her from the assaults of a man who had been his fellow-prisoner at the penal settlement. He was accused of murdering the Parisian and of attempting to murder Gisèle, and both crimes were attributed to jealousy.

Gisèle had recovered from her wounds, but the poor girl's reason seemed hopelessly affected, and a brief cross-examination disclosed that any hope of obtaining the least glimmer of light on the tragedy from her must be abandoned.

The public prosecutor at one time had in mind to link together the d'Haumont—Saint-Dalmas case with that of de Gorbio, but the judicial investigation, in so far as it related to the latter, threatened to last for some months, and public opinion which was greatly excited, would have regarded such a course merely as a dilatory method of postponing the punishment of a man who had abused public confidence, but still possessed powerful friends.

The public was exasperated with d'Haumont whom it had at one time treated as a hero, because he had so quickly become again what he was in the beginning—a murderer!

The newspapers were against him. The heroic deeds which he had performed in the war reacted against him. When a man had redeemed an infamous past in that way he

did not lose his honour a second time by betraying the confidence of a respectable family, by taking advantage of a young girl's ingenuousness, by marrying into one of the best known names in France and dragging it in the mire of a hideous scandal.

Françoise's cries of indignation and protestations of confidence in her husband's innocence merely created a sense of compassion for her. She was admired and pitied. She was playing a part. She was lying to save the honour of her name.

She alone exerted herself on his behalf, for M. de la Boulays was no longer to be seen. He was very ill and denied his door to every one.

Witnesses from Cape Ferrat stated that they had seen Françoise running about the beach at night time as though she were demented. The servants gave evidence as to the husband and wife's peculiar attitude towards each other, and their mistress's secret tears. . . Oh, they had had a nice honeymoon by the sea, and Monsieur d'Haumont himself was a pretty gentleman !

The fact that he had the audacity to introduce Gisèle, the young mannequin, into his own house with his wife put the finishing touch to an ignominious career.

The morning of the day on which the trial was to be opened, a trial which, it was thought, would last for several days, M. Martens was in his study reviewing and classifying the

various documents mentioned in his brief when the door behind him opened.

He looked round and beheld Madame d'Haumont being quietly shown in by Madame Martens who, herself, discreetly withdrew.

The Solicitor-General's features, which at first displayed a furious look of annoyance, became as rigid as a statue.

He allowed the unhappy woman to approach or rather to drag herself up to him, though she dared not lift her eyes to his passionless face.

And yet, with a gesture of forbearance, he stopped her movement to throw herself at his feet. He tried to speak, but she did not give him time to utter a word.

She had come to him not to beg for compassion, but for justice. She had never been understood. True she had been allowed to have her say during the investigation, but the men to whom she had spoken or who cross-examined her, had listened to the words which fell from her lips without believing her, without trying to believe her. Had they tried to believe her they would have understood her, they would have understood her meaning, for they would have discovered by probing their own hearts, that a woman like Françoise would never have continued to love a man like Didier had she doubted his innocence either of the murder of which he was convicted years before, or of that of which he was accused then.

"He told me the truth. I knew that my husband was an escaped convict. I knew it. . . I knew it. He told me so himself."

"Before or after your marriage?" M. Martens deigned to ask.

"Before, before, before," cried Françoise, springing to her feet. "He told me so before our marriage. So that you see he is an honest man. He has never deceived anyone. He is incapable of deceiving any one. You see. . . it was *before*."

"You swear that?" asked M. Martens, this time undoubtedly impressed.

Françoise perceived his agitation. It was the first time that she had obtained the semblance of interest from that man with a heart of stone. She did not waver. She believed that she would save Didier.

"I swear it."

"On what? . . . Swear it on the crucifix."

"I swear it on the crucifix," she said, her face whiter than an altar cloth, while in her heart she breathed a prayer: "God will forgive me and save him!"

"Now, madame, you have sworn falsely. You are not accustomed to that yet. . . However, it is not a very serious offence here—it is simply a matter between you and your Maker."

He rang the bell. Françoise swayed and leant for support against the wall.

" Did he also tell you that Gisèle was his daughter ? "

" Yes, yes. He told me everything."

The poor thing no longer knew what she was saying or doing. M. Martens took pity on her, recognising that she was in a state bordering on frenzy. He went up to her, and supported her, and when the servant appeared he told her to fetch Madame Martens. The latter came hurrying in, for she had been waiting in an agony of suspense to hear the result of this final appeal.

" See your friend out," he said. " She has completely lost her head. She declares that her husband told her that Gisèle was his daughter. She forgets that she already stated to the examining-magistrate that it was you who gave her this singular information."

Françoise no longer understood him. . . She was not listening to them. They might think what they liked now that she was certain that nothing could prevail against them.

She left them or rather she fled. Didier was to be brought to the Law Courts at that hour. She had no time to lose.

Meantime Madame Martens said to her husband, who reproached her in harsh language for her audacity in receiving and showing into his study a woman with whom he had to break off all relations,

" Suppose she is his daughter ! "

M. Martens shrugged his shoulders.

"Once for all," he said in severe tones, "be good enough not to interfere in this matter. People say that I have a hard heart, and am incapable of the least feeling of indulgence. I am not so however to you. Any other man in my position, would never forgive you for what you had the nerve to do without consulting me beforehand. Besides, when I learnt that on your own initiative you called on the examining-magistrate and told him that it was well-known in the circles which Raoul de Saint-Dalmas used to visit, that there was a liaison between him and some society woman and that a child was born—when I learnt that you were guilty of the recklessness, nay worse, the blunder of introducing my name knowing that I was engaged in the case, my fury was such that, at that moment, I could have struck you."

He stopped speaking for a moment, interrupting the threatening gesture which he had made.

"And then I who am supposed to be heartless, I paused to reflect, and I said to myself that your old friendship for Françoise, whom you knew as a child, for M. de la Boulays who was your father's friend, your affection for a family so sorely tried, led you to invent at Madame d'Haumont's entreaty this preposterous tale. . .

"So I found an excuse for you and forgave you. But on condition that you did not see

Françoise again, or take any more foolish steps. I am indebted only to the friendship of the prisoner's counsel that you are not called upon to give evidence. . .

"And here you are doing the same thing to-day. . . Here you are forcing into my study the wife of the convict against whom I am to appear! . . . Upon my soul, when I listen to you and when I look at you, you seem to me to be as crazy as she is."

Crazy! Yes, Madame Martens might well be crazy. Day and night she had waited for the coming of some event, some incident, some help from Heaven which would, as in a flash, reveal the truth that Gisèle was the daughter of Raoul de Saint Dalmas. . . But the day of the trial had come and in the eyes of her husband the truth appeared a "preposterous tale."

Like a woman who was beside herself she answered every reproach uttered by the Solicitor-General by repeating in a voice which was almost sullen:

"Suppose he is speaking the truth? Suppose she is his daughter?"

But her increasing distraction only served to throw M. Martens back, there and then, on his usual attitude as a magistrate whom nothing can influence but the cold logic of facts.

He picked up his morocco leather portfolio, and placing it under his arm, said:

"That's just like you women. When-

ever some theory appeals to your feelings you adopt it and are prepared to sacrifice everything for it. By making such scenes, Juliette, you disturb my power of concentration of which I stand in the greatest need. And by introducing the accused man's wife into my house you might have greatly injured my reputation if it were not so well established. . . Calm yourself I beg, and stay indoors until the case is over. You must not be seen in Court. You must not be seen anywhere."

He left her. He had no sooner turned the corner of the street leading to the Court than she left the house in her turn, and flung herself into a passing taxi.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TRIAL

THERE was a great crush in the Court. It was as though all Paris was present. People travelled down specially, and they spent a cheerful night in their hotels, just as in the old days when there was a public execution they made revelry round the Roquette prison until the appointed hour.

The presiding judge was a very worthy man. He had no wish to make enemies among the more or less influential persons who asked him for an order for admission, and he had given his card to every one, or nearly every one, who applied to him.

Thus the atmosphere of the Court was more than close an hour before the proceedings opened.

The principal witnesses stood facing the judges' bench pending the summons of the usher.

Françoise's entrance excited so great a wave of curiosity that some of the persons present were, so to speak, submerged by it, and gave

way to a clamour as though they were stifling. It was a nice beginning!

Moreover, her entrance provided the preliminary incident. She came in alone. She arrived direct from M. Martens' house, and still had the distraught look which she wore when she left him.

The entire audience felt a compassion for her as though she were the martyr in the case.

Among the good friends seated in the front row who would have liked to play a small part in the drama was Madame d'Erlande. She occupied a place which Françoise had to pass, and as soon as Madame d'Erlande caught sight of her, she left the group of persons to whom she was relating extraordinary stories about the accused man's morality, and made a gesture as if she would clasp Françoise in her arms.

She imagined that this courageous display on her part could not fail to redound to her credit.

Unfortunately for her, when Françoise recognised her, she could not restrain an exclamation of disgust, and she fiercely and rudely thrust her aside.

"How dare you!"

And she passed on. The public broke into applause.

Madame d'Erlande did not possess many friends. She resented the hostile demonstration, and from that moment led the

clique who had made up their minds that Didier was guilty. The public was already divided into two camps and the trial had not yet begun !

At last the usher announced the opening of the Court. The presiding judge at once made a short speech in which he requested the persons present to maintain their calm. Then the jury were sworn.

The prisoner was ordered to be brought in, and Didier entered between two gendarmes.

He had never carried his head so high ; not even in the war under a hail of bullets. He seemed to have grown taller. He dominated the Court. He gazed at the judges and the jury, but did not see Françoise below him, who was staring at him despairingly, and who no longer had the strength to keep up her courage. She had to be taken out almost fainting before the witnesses were called.

And while the poor thing was being led out she gave a heart-rending sob which affected the entire public. Didier quivered and lowered his eyes to that part of the excited crowd which hid from sight the beloved and faithful wife, who had suffered so cruelly for his sake, and who at that moment was undergoing a prolonged agony. She had not deserved her fate, and her life would have been happy, delightful, brilliant, had she not one day encountered Didier, an escaped convict.

Confronted by the conception of this deadly injustice, he forgot that he himself was the victim of fate, and fiercely accused himself, accused himself in no uncertain tone. His first words, words which rang out as soon as the trial was opened, before his examination began were :

" My only crime was against her ! "

And he pointed with a trembling hand to the woman who was being taken out.

Then he succeeded in mastering his emotion, and gathering strength from his recovered calmness, his eyes roamed searchingly round until they alighted on that part of the Court in which the public were standing.

But apparently he failed to perceive in that direction the person for whom he was seeking, for a look of gloom overspread his face as he turned again to the judges.

What was Chéri-Bibi doing at that moment ? In truth, thought Didier, it would have been asking too much from his daring to expect him to be present at the trial in person among that bevy of police, especially as all seemed lost, and the police knew that the redoubtable convict was in Paris, and were energetically devoting themselves to the task of hunting him down.

They were aware of the friendship which bound him to Didier in the convict settlement. They must have assumed that his curiosity would lead him to attend the trial, and prepared some trap for him. Chéri-

Bibi, doubtless, had got wind of their intention and kept out of the way.

" Well," muttered the accused, " my doom is as good as sealed."

He listened to the reading of the indictment with close and obvious attention. Many prisoners assume an attitude of indifference or contrition ; but little by little as proofs were added one to the other, appearing to crush him beneath their weight, he displayed, more markedly, that air of defiance which was expressed on his countenance when he was first brought into Court.

His look became harder. His eyes flashed when he gazed at the Court and the jury. Certainly he made no effort by appropriate demeanour to excite the pity or the clemency of his judges.

He declined to employ counsel, and the Court was obliged to appoint one officially to undertake his defence.

The latter part of the day was occupied with the prisoner's examination.

His replies in no way conflicted with his former testimony. He repeated what he had stated before the examining magistrate, and did not allow himself to be disconcerted by apparent inconsistencies ; he strenuously denied what appeared, even to the least prejudiced minds, to be as clear as daylight, and fought a losing battle with a fierce energy which served to increase the indignation of

the major portion of the public who were convinced of his guilt.

As to the other portion, they could do no more to show their faith in his innocence than to rely despairingly on the sincerity of his accents.

Nor did they fail to do so. Some of his old comrades were in Court, men who in the crucial hours which they had spent together, had been able to judge him according to his works. They called to mind that sense of discipline and confidence which had helped them not only to repulse the enemy, but to triumph over themselves, and to perform deeds which demanded every sacrifice. They reminded themselves that moral courage like that was incapable of deceit.

They did not reason about it, they felt it. And their emotion burst forth in spite of themselves when the accused, tired of replying to so many questions, which were pressing hard upon him from all sides, made a clean sweep of them with a bold gesture, and sat down at the end of a cross-examination which had exhausted him, uttering these final words :

" If I alone were concerned I should have surrendered to you a life which is hateful to me. But what I am defending is the honour of a woman, the honour of a name. I declare that I have not been unworthy of the one or the other. I confess that I escaped from the settlement in order to build up a new career.

I thought at one time that the dawn of a fresh life was rising before me. Unfortunately, fate, which so blindly struck me down fifteen years ago, is seeking me to-day, and is once more crushing me. But I am as innocent of the present crime as I was of the past one."

At this point the Court was adjourned until the following day. On leaving his seat the Solicitor-General, M. Martens, could not help letting slip from his thin lips the words: "What play acting!" which said all that was to be said for his state of mind towards the prisoner.

The expression was heard by some of the jury, who smiled. Still they were impressed.

"Oh, he knows how to talk," said one of them as he left the Law Courts. "I am not surprised that he has the women on his side."

All the women were in Didier's favour except Madame d'Erlande. As M. Martens was returning home she contrived to join him. They were acquaintances. They walked part of the way together.

Their conversation, apparently, was not without interest, for when the time came to part the Solicitor-General remarked:

"It's a pity that you were seen at the trial to-day. Still, it doesn't matter. We can arrange to call you as a witness all the same."

"Oh, I am not at all anxious for that if you don't mind," returned Madame d'Erlande, quickly, "and I am too close a friend of

Françoise to come forward and give evidence which she would resent, for she wants to save the scoundrel at all costs. But I may say that I was not the only one to witness the circumstances which I've told you about. I was with my friend Mlle. Bauvais, who knows as much as I do, and has no reason to hold her tongue."

When he reached his house the Solicitor-General was in a pleasant frame of mind. He asked to see his wife. His servant told him that she went out during the morning soon after he himself left, and had not returned.

M. Martens found a letter from her in his study stating that as he did not wish her to be seen during the trial, she had gone away for a few days.

CHAPTER XXX

NINA NOHA'S HIDING-PLACE

One person who followed with absorbed interest the successive stages of the d'Haumont trial, though she remained in Paris, was Nina Noha.

Since the day of de Gorbio's arrest, she had been living in a state of the greatest apprehension. The Count's prosecution lay within the jurisdiction of the Military Courts, and the dancer was one of the first witnesses to be called and examined.

It was not without a feeling of intense dread that she answered the summons, though for that matter she expected it, and could avoid it only by flight, a contingency for which she had made her preparations on the off chance. Her friends, who were usually well informed, assured her that she had no cause to fear since she had nothing to reproach herself with. De Gorbio had deceived others as well as herself. And, in all conscience, no one could be astonished that she had not suspected the criminal traffic in which he was engaged, seeing that

a man like M. de la Boulays was utterly deceived by him for so many years.

As a matter of fact the proceedings passed off without a hitch. Her relations with the Count were those of friendship, she declared, and his conduct had never given her any reason to doubt his patriotism. He was constantly telling her, moreover, that having put all this money into munition factories the defeat of France would mean ruin to him. That was all that she could say about him.

The dancer's friends were able to prove that there had been a coldness between the Count and her for some time, and that she had determined to leave him, a course which she would, undoubtedly, have taken but for the circumstances of his arrest.

Nina no sooner left the office of the military judge, who was conducting the investigation, than she was called upon to appear before the examining magistrate, who was investigating the d'Haumont case. As Captain d'Haumont was demobilised before the murder at the "Fir Tree Inn," his case had to go before the Assize Court, and Nina was examined by a civilian magistrate. He was not less considerate than the other.

It was known that d'Haumont had called upon the dancer at Nice. He did not deny the visit; on the contrary, he explained the purpose of it.

"What is this story about a necklace?" the magistrate asked Nina.

"The poor fellow had entirely lost his head," she replied smiling. "I need not tell you that I recognised him at the first glance. I night have informed against him. I would not have done so for anything in the world. He was making a new career for himself, and a good thing, too. Still I was obliged to show him the door when he came to tell me that a necklace which I wore at a charitable fête at Valrose was very much like the one which was stolen from Reynaud, the banker, the day of his murder. Innocent or guilty, I was not keen on his calling and worrying me with his delusions."

Nina had concocted a nice little story in the event of the judge asking to see the necklace, but she had no necessity to employ it. The magistrate, indeed, had nothing to do with a case which had been tried, and as he assumed, properly tried some fifteen years before.

After addressing a few words of remonstrance which seemed more in the nature of compliments to the good looking woman who had refused to become an auxiliary of the detective service, the magistrate accompanied her to the door of his office with every mark of politeness. Nina had not seen him again.

To be left in peace in both cases at first reassured, but afterwards astonished and alarmed her, especially as it seemed to her that she was being watched.

Soon she imagined that she had been treated with indulgence in order to lull her into a sense of security. That was the usual tactics employed in cases of the sort. The chief culprit was arrested, but his accomplices were free to do as they pleased so that by some unguarded action they might assist the authorities. And one fine day, when the police held all the cards in their hands, they were nabbed!

Accordingly Nina increased her precautions. Nevertheless she felt that it was quite time for her to get away, and but for the fear of arrest on crossing the frontier, she would have made herself "safe" several weeks before. Finally, she arranged to effect her escape in a manner which would not be suspected by anyone. . .

The day on which Nina appears on the scene again was the first day of the d'Haumont trial, and she was making an ostentatious show of her preparations for a journey which it was known that she had to make. She was required to give evidence in the Assize Court for which she had been subpœnaed by the defence. That would occupy some twenty-four hours. She was announced to perform on the evening before, and also on the second evening after her departure. What she kept to herself was that when the train slowed down at a certain place, she would get out on the other platform and slip into a motor car which would take her

across the frontier before her flight would be discovered. . .

Nina was returning at five o'clock in the afternoon from a dress rehearsal at the Odéon Theatre, at which she had been anxious to show herself, so that every one should appreciate her equanimity in the difficult times through which she was passing, for the most circumstantial rumours were current implicating her with de Gorbio, and she was being driven home when she suddenly stopped the car.

The newsboys were shouting out the evening papers, and as they darted through the streets they displayed the contents bills on which could be seen in big letters :

" D'HAUMONT TRIAL.
" DRAMATIC SCENES IN COURT.
" PRISONER IN THE BOX."

She leant out of the car to buy a paper, and at that very moment a car which was closely following hers, was caught unawares by the abrupt stoppage, and gave a clumsy lurch and brushed against the dancer's hand.

She uttered a slight cry and eyed the occupants. She turned pale and flung herself back, for she recognised the policeman who arrested the Count.

When she alighted from her car outside the house at the corner of the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, she threw a quick glance round the neighbourhood. She could detect

nothing suspicious. The police car was nowhere in sight.

Possibly it was but an accidental meeting. She dared not trust in this assumption for she was strengthened in the conviction, which had been passing through her mind for some time, that the police would not let her out of sight, and were probably only waiting for a favourable opportunity to place her under arrest.

She was to travel by the eight o'clock train next morning. She regretted that she was not leaving that evening. But that would have raised the alarm. She now had a positive feeling that her safety wholly depended upon the coolness which she displayed up to the last moment while carrying out calmly and naturally the programme with which the police were familiar.

It occurred to her that they might have decided to arrest her in the Assize Court. The thought greatly comforted her. She would be far away when they were waiting for her in the Assize Court !

She cast a glance into the street and gave a start. Two policemen stood on the pavement. She dropped the window curtain. What a fool she was ! Two policemen on their beat—there was nothing out of the way in that ! It was not the first time that she had seen them in the Rue Lesueur. . . .

She was restless. She could not eat anything. She was expecting young Darcy, her

latest admirer, to call and take her to the theatre. Gossip behind the scenes pointed to him as de Gorbio's successor.

He did not come. Was he going to desert her like the many others who discovered such curious reasons for keeping out of her way!

She ought to have left France long ago. She was furious with those for whom she had been secretly working during so many years for compelling her to remain behind, until the last day, at the mercy of the worst calamity.

Was not everything lost now that de Gorbio had been arrested? Of course it was; and since, in fact, all was lost and nothing more was to be expected from her and de Gorbio, her employers were ridding themselves of both of them at one and the same stroke.

She shuddered. She conjured up a ghastly vision. Court martials did not spare women. There were striking examples which made a great stir at the time. . . . She pictured the firing party at Vincennes, and in the cold mist of early morning the fashionably dressed form of a woman, still young, falling to the ground riddled with bullets. . . .

"The car" she ordered in a hoarse voice.

The policemen were no longer in the street. Nor were there any policemen outside the theatre. . . . nor inside the theatre.

And then had not the hour passed—the

hour at which they had arrested de Gorbio? Was not their object rather to seize her somewhere in the very act of working for the enemy? She tried to reason but could not concentrate her thoughts.

She did not quite regain her composure until she saw her dresser, who remarked:

"Oh, madame, you do look ill."

"Has M. Darcy been?"

"No, madame, no one."

Her latest admirer, M. Darcy, was the only man who had remained faithful to her since de Gorbio's arrest.

She noticed the absence of the usual supply of flowers which he was in the habit of sending every evening to her dressing-room. She called to mind a similar incident on the evening of de Gorbio's arrest, and it seemed like an evil omen.

This man, of course, had deserted her like the others. She remembered that during the last few days the public had received her coldly.

Suddenly her dressing-room door was opened and Darcy came in.

He was very pale, and Nina at once perceived that he was the bearer of fresh news. She sent her dresser away. He quickly informed her—

"You're going to be arrested to-morrow morning!"

Nina Noha received the blow with courage, asked for details and wanted to know all

about it. Darcy did not keep anything from her. He received the news from an intimate friend connected with the headquarters of police who had obtained particulars in order to show Darcy that he was making a mistake to maintain relations with Nina Noha who was more than suspect.

"Do you know why I am to be arrested? Does de Gorbio intend to involve me in his affairs?"

"I think I may assure you that de Gorbio has not said anything against you, and I am under the impression that you are to be arrested in the hope that you will ruin de Gorbio. You are to be arrested so that you may turn informer."

"But I am not his accomplice."

"That's what I've always said. If I did not know that you were innocent I should not be here. You know that quite well, Nina."

"Listen to me, my boy. Do you really love me, eh?"

"Do I really love you!"

He gazed eagerly at her with tears in his eyes. The poor fellow had never been anything to her, and she was to be arrested next morning!

"Well, as you love me and believe in my innocence you shall be rewarded by my proving to you that I have nothing to fear. As long as I retain my liberty we will be together."

"Oh Nina, my Nina!"

He fell on his knees before her and kissed her hands.

"Come, get up quickly," she said firmly. "Let us be calm. Let us act as if we knew nothing. Let us think only of our love."

"Yes, yes," returned Darcy, who was now choking with joy. "I will do anything you please. I am your slave. If you wish to get away I will go abroad with you. And if they arrest you they shall arrest me with you."

"There's no question of getting away. The thing is to go and have some supper. You must order a table at N. . . ."

"What do you say? You want to go to that low hole to-night?"

"I understand what you mean, my boy, but try to understand me also. I shan't be dancing the tango to-morrow you know. Well, jump into my car and go to N. . . . as from me. Order me a special supper—you know how to choose it—and come back here as soon as you can. . . . Good-bye for the present, dearest. . . . I shall be impatiently waiting for you."

He left the room and the dresser came in.

"Take a taxi," said Nina, "and go to the chemist and get me some tabloids. I have a fearful headache."

When she was alone she made for an old chest which was locked, opened it, and picked out from a heap of stage properties a bodice

and quickly ripped open the seams of the lining.

She drew from it a curiously shaped pearl and some old letters. The evidence of de Gorbio's guilt in the murder of Reynaud the banker, lay there among other valuable papers. It was impossible to leave them there. She determined to take them to the secret receptacle in which de Gorbio had already placed the necklace, and in which certain letters of great interest to the two accomplices were also concealed. Events were following so closely one upon the other that it would be in the highest degree reckless to take abroad with her, as she had hoped, so many articles which were compromising for all concerned. She might be arrested at any moment during the hazardous flight which she was about to attempt. De Gorbio's hiding-place would set at defiance the most rigid search.

Only it was necessary to be able to get to it !

Among the rags and tinsel which she took from the chest was a scene-shifter's suit of cast off clothes including a cap.

She hurriedly put the suit on, and let down the shutter which closed the wicket in the door of the dressing-room.

She waited until there was no one in the dimly lit corridor and darted down it. A minute later she was in the street. She walked along imperturbably with her cap drawn over her eyes and her hands in her

pockets, like a decent workman whose conscience is clear, and who after a good day's work has been refreshing himself in the public-house in company with his mates.

No one was following the workman. As a matter of fact, Nina Noha had thrown them all off the scent—her lover, her dresser, the police and the detectives.

She began to breathe freely again. Her situation was far from hopeless.

She reached the corner of the Rue de Dunkerque. Here, it will be remembered, stood one of the Count's residences. The authorities had thoroughly searched the place without, however, discovering anything suspicious; for they were unaware that the outbuildings of the block were much more worthy of inspection than the house itself.

Our scene-shifter crept along the pavement to the public-house door. Here, too, as far as could be judged, the place was empty. The shutters were closed and scarcely a gleam of light could be seen.

Not a sound. But that was not surprising. After de Gorbio's arrest, the special customers which formed the backbone of the business must have "kept out of the way" somewhere else!

Nina Noha went down to the second hand dealer's shop, and knocked in a peculiar way.

The dealer promptly opened the door. She slipped into the shop, closing the door behind

her. The dealer did not at first recognise his visitor. He threw the light of a dark lantern on her face, and showed that he was armed.

Nina removed her cap. The man took a step back in amazement.

"Yes, it's me. I haven't a minute to waste. Anything fresh here?"

"The police came a few days ago but not for us," he said.

"Well, that's a good job."

"They came with some story about a certain Chéri-Bibi."

"What story?"

"It seems that the celebrated bandit escaped from the penal settlement, and they thought they'd seen him prowling round here."

"Well, let 'em hunt for Chéri-Bibi and leave us alone. Take me down to the cellar," said Nina in a voice of command.

The dealer lifted the trap-door in the room behind the shop, as he had already done in the presence of Yoyo, and Nina descended a few steps. She took the dark lantern from him.

"Wait for me here," she ordered.

* * * * * *

The police were not misinformed in hunting for Chéri-Bibi in the neighbourhood of the Rue de Dunkerque. The truth was that for many weeks Chéri-Bibi, the Dodger, Yoyo and Zoé had taken it in turns to watch the

cellars in which they felt confident that de Gorbio's hiding-place was situated.

When Chéri-Bibi departed for the time being to the South, taking his friends with him, he made it his business to leave in this mysterious place a reliable sentinel who was able to keep him well-informed of the least incident. But since de Gorbio's visit for the purpose of getting rid of the necklace, nothing had happened.

Chéri-Bibi was in hopes that some emissary of de Gorbio or Nina, not suspecting that he was being spied upon, would appear in the basement one day or night and betray at last the secret of the hiding-place. Many weeks had elapsed, and the Nut's trial had begun, but Chéri-Bibi was no further advanced than before.

He had his own particular way of reaching the cellars. He made up his mind that that night should be the last which he would devote to the basements in the Rue de Dunkerque. He decided that next morning, even if he returned empty-handed, he would take the train to the town where the Nut's fate was being decided.

A final access of rage led him to search the whole place, and dig and ransack it over again. The floor, the building stones in the wall—everything was turned upside down.

The Dodger was at the end of his endurance. Yoyo could bear no more. Zoé was serving out drinks to the exhausted company

in a mug, for amid their troubles they at least had the consolation of knowing that the Count's wine was good; and, indeed, it was excellent. There was a special cask which the Dodger had honoured with a tap, and he usually drew from it more than was good for him.

Sometimes he brought with him his dinner, consisting of a chunk of bread and a morsel of saveloy, and, truth to tell, with the help of the Count's wine he managed to forget many things—his shop in the Rue Saint Roch, the querulous Virginie, the smiles of Zoé and Yoyo, and Chéri-Bibi's inconceivable obstinacy in making them live in a cellar which no longer held any secret from them.

Suddenly Yoyo raised himself on his hands, his ears pricked up like a cat's. Cheri-Bibi also heard the sound. . . . someone was coming down the cellar stairs.

And then there was a gleam of light.

The four of them hid themselves in an adjoining cellar from which they could observe everything that occurred.

At first they beheld a dark form, which they took for a man, standing at the door which he had just opened. The condition of the lock aroused his misgivings, from all appearance, though they had done their utmost to prevent the suspicion that it had been tampered with.

Smarting under the blow of this discovery the shadowy figure quickly entered the cellar,

obviously anxious as to what was to be revealed. Someone had been in that cellar. Someone had, perhaps, unearthed the hiding-place.

Chéri-Bibi's heart was filled with a wonderful hope. He recognised Nina Noha.

She cast the flashing light of her dark lantern into all the corners of the basement, noticing that the " someone " had not left a square inch unturned. And then she muttered aloud :

" The idiots haven't found anything ! "

Chéri-Bibi was the less annoyed by this reflection, inasmuch as he knew that she was not referring to him, but to the police for whom, for that matter, he himself had but a qualified admiration.

Breathing quickly and more excited, perhaps, than Nina herself, he watched her make, this time without hesitation, for a corner of the cellar ; the corner in which stood the cask dear to the Dodger's heart ; the cask from which not long before Chéri-Bibi himself had quenched his thirst.

Nina put the lantern on the cask. Then opening wide her scene-shifter's jacket she drew from her bodice the letters and the case containing the clouded pearl.

She put these things also on the cask. Then using both hands she began to pull the large wooden plug of the bung.

The bung came away, but it was a peculiar bung. . . . very, very long. . . . a bung

which began with a plug and ended in a metal tube, a tube which in ordinary circumstances remained in the wine !

Chéri-Bibi and the Dodger had to exercise their utmost self-control to avoid giving utterance to a loud exclamation.

Now they grasped the situation. The necklace for which they were searching was hidden in the wine which they had been drinking ; and shake the cask as they might no sound would have been produced but that of liquid which was being stirred.

They had time to perceive that the tube contained likewise valuable papers which Nina took out and examined. She then packed together in the tube the necklace and the letters which she had taken out, and the other things which she had brought with her.

At this juncture she seemed to take time to think, apparently asking herself whether it was wise to continue to leave such treasures in a cellar which might be subjected to a further search.

It so happened that having asked herself the question she was spared the trouble of furnishing an answer, for something formidable swooped down upon her, and before she had time to utter a cry, she no longer held in her hands the precious bung which contained so many secrets.

Nina staggered under the shock to the wall which divided the cellar from the public-house cellar, the door of which stood ajar.

She rushed through it mad with terror, pushed back the door, bolted it, and imagined that at least her life was safe.

She hurriedly climbed the ladder leading to the trap-door in the public-house, and banged upon it with all her might. She knew that here she could count upon assistance.

The trap-door was in fact lifted, and Nina sprang into the room which at that moment was flooded with light.

"I tell you we've got him," said a rough voice.

Nina was in fact once more swooped down upon ; and a light fell full on her face.

"Damn it all, it's a woman ! And, old man, she not's a bit like Chéri-Bibi."

"No, but she's very much like Nina Noha ! It's a good prize all the same."

Nina Noha gave vent to a scream of fury. They put the handcuffs on her.

CHAPTER XXXI

CHÉRI-BIBI MAKES AN IMPRESSION

THERE was an immense commotion in the Assize Court. The hearing on that day promised to be the most sensational of the d'Haumont trial. The best informed among the public maintained that the sitting would be decisive, for a rumour was current that certain fresh evidence would throw a complete light on the case.

The result was that, long before the Court was opened, the hall in which the trial was held was besieged by a crowd, which grew more and more impatient. An unexpected incident raised the general excitement to the highest pitch. The public suddenly caught sight of two persons surrounded by policemen marching towards the corridor which led to the witnesses' rooms; and they recognised in those two prisoners the Count de Gorbio and Nina Noha.

So Nina Noha had been arrested as well! The information had not hitherto reached the provinces. But it now spread through

the Court and the town with lightning rapidity.

Now that it was certain that the Count and his erstwhile mistress, who had also been Raoul de Saint-Dalmas's friend, were to give evidence, a rush was straightway made to the Court room. The officials whose duty it was to maintain order, were helpless to stem the torrent, and the public streamed into the hall shouting and crushing each other as they went.

When the presiding judge was informed of what had happened, he requested reinforcements from the authorities, and the trial did not begin until he had reprimanded the public and threatened to have the Court cleared if there was the least demonstration. But they had heard that story before! It failed to make an impression on anyone. Moreover, the public were so eager to see and to hear that perfect silence fell when the judge ordered the usher to "Call Madame d'Haumont!"

The time had come for the witnesses for the defence to give evidence, and it was none too soon. The last two sittings had been disastrous for the prisoner. The evidence of Madame d'Erlande's lady friend, in particular, produced the worst impression. This worthy lady told with frankness everything that she had seen or heard about Captain d'Haumont's relations with Mlle. Violette's young mannequin. She knew all about him;

for instance, she knew that Captain d'Haumont waited about on the pavement for hours for her ; she knew that nothing could prevent him from visiting Gisèle at the shop or at Madame Antheny's flat ; so, gentlemen of the jury, draw your own conclusions ! She had seen enough to know what to think about the character of those relations.

At the house of dear Madame d'Haumont—the poor martyr !—who cruelly suffered but kept silence in order to avoid a scandal, and in the garden of the Villa Thalassa, she had seen, with her own eyes, the two lovers walking hand in hand, exchanging kisses, and separating from each other when the servants approached.

This unfavourable evidence was followed by that of the elder Mlle. Violette, which was even more unfortunate for the accused, if such were possible. And yet she herself entertained no doubt as to the innocence of Captain d'Haumont's relations with her assistant. Still, every word that she uttered seemed to increase the certainty of his guilt in the minds of those who supported the contrary view.

Mlle. Violette was extremely simple to allow herself to be " taken in " in that way. Moreover, nothing up to then proved that Mme. Antheny was not Gisèle's real mother whatever d'Haumont might say to the contrary. He would have had to produce, in order to support his allegation, the papers

discovered by Gisèle on the night of Mme. Antheny's death. Gisèle burnt them on d'Haumont's advice! A nice story! No one believed in it any longer.

Such was the position of affairs when Françoise appeared in the box. A murmur of pity swept through the court. She grasped the meaning of the "interest" with which she was regarded, and she began her evidence by lifting her voice with indignation against this general feeling which was an affront to her.

"People have insulted me by pitying me as a victim grossly deceived by the most cowardly of men. I declare openly that however much your judgment may be blinded by past events, I do not deserve any person's pity, as I am proud to be the wife of a hero and a martyr!"

This young wife, who was apparently so frail, seemed to tower above the Court, and hold it, as it were, in the hollow of her hand—the hand which she stretched out to Didier with a spontaneous gesture of love.

By this time everyone was quivering with excitement, swayed by her intense sincerity. At least they no longer doubted her. She was not playing a splendid farce. She believed what she said.

And continuing to point to her husband, who thanked Heaven for that glorious moment which compensated him for all the calamities of the past, she went on:

" Yes, a martyr—first of all unjustly sentenced for the murder of Reynaud the banker."

At this bold declaration which challenged the entire paraphernalia of justice, M. Martens, the Solicitor General, stood up and seemed to shatter at a blow the force of a statement which may have sounded admirable, but which possessed a purely sentimental value as a defence. He asked in sarcastic tones intended to bring people's minds down to earth in regard to established facts :

" Perhaps Madame d'Haumont will tell us who did murder Reynaud the banker ! "

The poor thing was utterly taken aback. She was about, however, to make some sort of answer when a voice from the other side of the court shouted :

" I know who murdered Reynaud the banker ! "

Every head turned in the direction of the man who had uttered that amazing statement. The judge ordered him to be brought to the bar.

In a few strides thrusting aside and hustling the persons near him he reached it.

And people were asking themselves who was this giant with a face marked by ferocity and good nature alike, when he took it upon himself to enlighten the Court.

" My name is Chéri-Bibi ! "

A confused murmur arose like a shudder of

fear and the words were echoed throughout the Court :

" Chéri-Bibi ! . . . It's Chéri-Bibi ! "

The judges did not speak. They stared at him. They were watching him.

" Well, yes, what about it ? I'm Chéri-Bibi. This is the fourth time that I've escaped from the penal settlement. . . . Hang it all, call the gendarmes."

As a matter of fact the gendarmes had seized him. They tried to put on the handcuffs.

" No, my boys, now you're going too fast," he said. " Let me at least give my evidence first." And turning to the presiding judge :

" I have things of the greatest importance to tell you, but I wish to speak in the presence of two witnesses whom I passed just now in the corridor. . . . You shall know the whole truth when the Count de Gorbio and Nina Noha are in Court."

All this was so entirely unexpected that it was Chéri-Bibi who now appeared to be taking charge of the proceedings.

The presiding judge gave the order, and de Gorbio and Nina were brought in.

The entire Court was on its feet in the expectation of witnessing some extraordinary scene. The voices of persons who could see nothing and were being partly suffocated by those in front could be heard shouting, "Sit down ! Sit down ! " and above the din the

presiding judge's voice: "I will have the Court cleared!"

De Gorbio and Nina were now standing before the judges and staring at Chéri-Bibi at an utter loss. At last the secret was revealed.

"That man is the murderer of Reynaud the banker," he cried, pointing to de Gorbio, "and there is his accomplice," he added, indicating Nina Noha.

The Count and Nina raised an outcry in the midst of great excitement. They shouted and protested. They heaped abuse on the witness.

The presiding judge gave up the attempt to make himself heard. He was about to suspend the sitting when Chéri-Bibi held him back with a gesture.

He took from his pockets the necklace and the letters. He flaunted them under the eyes of de Gorbio and Nina, and handed them to the usher who placed them before the judge.

"Here are my proofs in their own handwriting," he cried.

It was no longer possible to entertain any doubt, and, moreover, a glance at de Gorbio and the dancer, who were in a state of collapse, showed how matters stood.

There was a spontaneous movement of fury against the two wretched prisoners, and it seemed as if the wave which was beating against them would engulf them.

Luckily Chéri-Bibi was there! He had

but to turn round, raise his tremendous fists, and the " crowd fell back terrified."

" You're not going to kill them, I suppose, before they've had a fair trial. . . . And now that you know the truth, Monsieur le President, in the Reynaud case, you can believe the accused when he tells you that Gisèle is his daughter. As for me, I have no further business here. Gendarmes, do your duty. Bring the handcuffs. And let me be taken back to the penal settlement. And sharp about it if you don't mind. I've been deprived of the prison gang too long. Away from the old place I feel bored to death."

But before the handcuffs could encircle his wrists a little hand was placed in his—it was Françoise's hand.

Didier in the dock could not restrain his emotion.

" Good-bye Nut," said Chéri-Bibi, with a hoarse sob which caught him by the throat. " Good-bye, old pal. If you ever want me you've only got to say the word. I shall hear you out there."

Didier stood up with outstretched hands. No power could deter the bandit ; and the two men clasped each other in a tense and solemn silence. Only M. Martens' voice was heard :

" Oh, they understand each other well in the convict settlement ! "

" The convict settlement where you sent my husband for ten years for a crime which he did not commit," Françoise made answer,

amid applause which shook the building. "One man alone believed in his innocence. That man was Chéri-Bibi. At least allow my husband to say thank you to him."

"She's a ripping little woman!" came from a voice at the back of the court.

It was Zoé who, greatly touched by the farewell scene between Chéri-Bibi and the Nut, threw herself on Yoyo's neck.

The Dodger tried to induce her to transfer her attentions to himself. Yoyo rivetted him with a "red-skin's" stare. The Dodger did not persist.

"I'm taking her out there you understand," said Yoyo. "We shall go along with Chéri-Bibi. There's nothing to prevent you from coming out also with your Virginie."

"I am too old," sighed the Dodger.

"Send me out a few prunes," said Chéri-Bibi as he marched past between the warders.

"*Fatalitas!* Here's Monsieur le Marquis nabbed again," cried the Dodger.

CHAPTER XXXII

MADAME MARTENS

CHÉRI-BIBI's disclosure came as a startling climax, but very little knowledge of the usual frame of mind of a magistrate like the Solicitor General—a man who was a slave to his conscience and invariably ignored emotional outbursts—was necessary to realise that the proof which had been furnished of de Gorbio's guilt in a case which, after all, was not within the jurisdiction of that Court, would not for a moment shake his conviction in regard to the actual trial.

He at once brought the proceedings back to their real object, namely, the trial of d'Haumont for the double crime at the "Fir Tree Inn."

Moreover, in order to combat the impression which the preceding incidents had produced in the minds of the jury, he did not hesitate to submit to them a theory which he himself accepted as a certainty. For some considerable time de Gorbio and the accused had been in league together. De Gorbio, Saint-Dalmas and Nina Noha formed a gang who were the

originators of the Reynaud murder. If de Gorbio was the actual perpetrator of he crime, as the letters seemed to indicate, Saint-Dalmas may well have been his accomplice.

As M. Martens was enunciating this deadly suggestion, de Gorbio took good care not to let so splendid a last hope slip from him. He rose to his feet and declared that, in this first case, he had merely been the tool of Saint-Dalmas, who suggested the scheme to him.

Unfortunately for de Gorbio and also, it may be said, for M. Martens, no one was convinced by these explanations. Far from it. An ominous murmur greeted the palpable invention which issued from de Gorbio's lips. Didier on the other hand was still so elated by the incident which had cleared him in the eyes of the world from the infamous past, that he did not at first realise what was being "faked up" against him.

Suddenly he grasped the sense of it. De Gorbio risked it! Then he drew himself up. This time he shook with rage. Until that moment he had remained master of himself, but now he gave full rein to his indignation. And he crushed de Gorbio with a denial of such striking eloquence that the Court—public, jury, judges—was carried away by it. Shouts of approval went up from the back, and the presiding judge made no attempt to suppress them. Moreover, from the attitude which he assumed in questioning the prisoner, it was realised that there was a new feeling

in the minds of everyone excepting M. Martens —a hope that Didier was entirely innocent.

"Do you still say that Gisèle is your daughter?" asked the judge.

"Yes, Monsieur le President."

"Does Gisèlle know that you are her father?"

"Yes, Monsieur le President."

Then there was a fresh sensation. The judge notified that in the exercise of his discretionary power he had ordered Gisèlle, whose health was improved, to be called as a witness. She would be heard simply on that particular point.

M. Martens turned to the judge in great surprise, and amidst a new stir, for the Court was waiting impatiently for Gisèle's entrance, asked:

"How do you know she is better? Who brought her here?"

Whereupon the judge made answer by indicating a woman who was seated behind him, in the front row reserved for distinguished visitors. That woman was Madame Martens.

Before the Solicitor General had time to give any thought to the conduct of his wife which was so impossible to understand, Gisèle entered the Court. She was accompanied by two women from the nursing home. One of them supported her. The poor child betrayed a certain anxiety and seemed awe-struck, notwithstanding the encouraging words that were lavished on her. Then she caught

sight of Françoise and nothing could hold her back. She went and flung herself into her arms weeping.

Françoise assisted her to the bar, and advised her to listen carefully to the judge's questions. Until then she had not observed Didier, who at the end of his powers of endurance, had dropped into his seat.

The presiding judge pointing to him asked Gisèle :

" Will you tell me who this man is ? "

Gisèle turned round and saw " this man " between the gendarmes. She quivered from head to foot. Her eyes opened in blank amazement. Obviously, she was making an effort to understand ; and, perhaps, she did understand.

" That's Captain d'Haumont," she replied.

" Is he your father ? "

The whole Court hung on Gisèle's answer. Didier conscious that his fate depended upon the words which she was about to utter stood up. He leant forward to catch what she said.

" I've never known my father."

The poor girl in her half-demented state, or at least in her confused mind, said to herself : " They know of course that my father was a convict. If I say that Captain d'Haumont is my father, I shall be betraying him to the police, or something akin to it." At all events she tried to save him—and she was his undoing !

Her answer caused an immense sigh of disappointment, and a faint exclamation and a sob could be heard from behind the judge.

It was to no purpose that Didier pointing to Gisèle said:

"You can see for yourself that the poor girl's memory is at fault."

"That will do. She has suffered enough," interrupted the Solicitor General. "That decides the case."

"Allow me, monsieur," returned the judge, quietly. "The case will be decided when I think fit." And turning to Didier: "If Gisèle is your daughter you can tell us where she was born."

Didier had recovered his composure. Standing erect with arms folded he seemed to be looking at the presiding judge. In reality he was gazing at a person seated behind the judge—a person who was suffering perhaps as much as he himself.

"No, I cannot tell you, for that would be to say who her mother is."

"You do not mean to tell us who her mother is?"

"No, Monsieur le President."

Whereupon the Solicitor General said with a sneer:

"Of course it's a question of honour."

"Yes, monsieur, a question of honour," returned Didier in a loud voice.

"That's the usual shuffling prevarication

which every miscreant indulges in to explain his movements after a murder."

Didier with flaming eyes cried :

" Let's have done with it then. Get your verdict ! "

The presiding judge rose to his feet and suspended the sitting. Gisèle was led into an adjoining room almost fainting.

The Solicitor General, alone in his office, seemed to savour his approaching victory. He was about to win it against every obstacle, against the presiding judge himself, who for a moment seemed to lean in Didier's favour, and finally against his own wife.

At this point his wife came into his room. She closed the door with a trembling hand ; and it looked as if she no longer possessed the strength to move a step. She leant against the door to prevent herself from falling. She was ashen grey in the face.

M. Martens assumed that the panic in her eyes was the result of the fear with which he inspired her. She had dared to take the initiative, and commit the fault of interfering in a matter of justice, and he reproached her as though it were a crime :

" By what right did you take it upon yourself to fetch Gisèle? Will you tell me that ? "

And straightway she made answer :

" I am Gisèle's mother ! "

* * * * * *

Possibly there was an awful scene, possibly

there was silence between those two beings afterwards. One thing is certain : those who saw the door of the Solicitor General's office open again beheld two persons who looked like ghosts emerge from it.

When the sitting was resumed one of those spectres stood up. He wore a black robe with red facings.

" The accused was speaking the truth," said M. Martens in a voice which had never been heard from him before. " He is Gisèle's father. . . . Gisèle's mother will stand at the bar of this Court to confess her sin. Her sin did I say ? . . . I mean her crime."

A great commotion mingled with loud exclamations of astonishment filled the Court. Who was this woman to whom M. Martens referred ? What was the fresh evidence which was to be given ? . . . A few shouts, and the name flew from one mouth to another. The second spectre appeared. It was Madame Martens.

It was the wife of the Solicitor General !

She seemed about to faint and the usher darted forward to lead her to the bar.

" Swear to speak the truth, the whole truth. . . ." said the presiding judge in a voice which shook with emotion.

She lifted her hand—a hand that was so white that it seemed already to pertain to the grave.

" I swear that. . . . Captain d'Haumont. . . . is the father of. . . ." And she sank

in a huddled heap to the ground.

She was perhaps a dying woman, but Didier was saved!

The Solicitor General went on in a strained voice:

"I withdraw the charge. In the name of the law I ask you, gentlemen of the jury, to return a verdict of acquittal, and I request the Court to order this man's provisional release pending a revision of the judgment in the first case. As for me, I am no longer entitled to occupy this position."

He left the Court with tottering footsteps. It was the end of an upright career.

There is no need to describe the excitement and enthusiasm with which d'Haumont's acquittal and release were received. A triumphant procession accompanied him and Françoise with Gisèle between them out of the Court. . . . A new and radiant promise loomed up before them. . . . The Court proceedings lasted until dawn—the dawn of brighter days!

THE END

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